FERNANDE



W. B. MAXWELL

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by

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I

As every Londoner knows, the neighbourhood of Covent Garden has long maintained a close alliance between literature and vegetables, or in other words between the fruits of the mind and the fruits of the earth. Publishers and banana merchants stand here shoulder to shoulder; the lorries that carry those enormous rolls of printing-paper which, when cut up, will eventually provide food for thought, jostle the morning waggons that are laden with a material but often more digestible form of nourishment; and the timid author of to-morrow's masterpiece treads upon the refuse of yesterday's cabbage leaves, while he is threatened overhead by cranes dropping parcels of unbound sheets into a van that will take them back to the paper-makers to be ignominiously pulped as one of last year's acknowledged failures.

Round the market itself religion and the ornaments of religion have strangely crept in of late years, so that the generous zealot about to offer a brass lectern to his parish church exchanges inquiries with persons merely desirous of advertising for a cook or housemaid. For it may be added that near the market the younger sister of literature, journalism, has rather rudely thrust a good many book publishers from their ancient positions in order to make room for the expanding space of newspaper offices. Indeed more than one newspaper has rebuilt its house on the largest and most splendid scale, obliterating half a dozen more modest inhabitants in the process.

But not so that very old-established journal, the *Mayfair Gazette*. Neither it nor its offices had altered within the memory of man. Entering its doors, you passed from modernity to antiquity. Its publishing day was Friday; but even in the act of being published it seemed half asleep, if not half dead.

Thus on a Friday afternoon of late autumn the manager sauntered drowsily about the dark ground floor, smoking cigarettes and counting the packages that were still being brought from the printers. A young man wheeled them in on a railway-porter's barrow and dumped them. Between these visits the manager, without removing the cigarette from lips hidden beneath a drooping moustache, talked to an invisible person in a back room who rarely answered him. She was a nondescript female assistant, and at present occupied herself in boiling a kettle and frying some eggs.

"That's the last," said the printer's man. Then, having dumped, he leaned the handles of the barrow against the passage wall and asked if he might see the editor.

"The editor! *Our* editor? D'you mean Mr. Faulkner?"

"I didn't know his name. But I want to speak to him if he'll be good enough to spare me a few minutes."

Mr. Cyril Faulkner, the editor, was a handsome, but very untidy man of thirty-five or forty at the outside, and seeing him seated at his editorial table, one could not observe his tallness and thinness. He tilted his hat to the back of his head, disclosing a mobile mouth, a big strong nose, a high bald forehead, and stared with

thoughtful eyes at the intruder who, after a little demur, had been announced as a person from the printers, of the name of Bowen.

"Well, what can I do for you?"

The young man explained shyly but firmly that he had seen an advertisement indicating that the staff of the paper was shorthanded and he wished to apply for the vacant post. His employ was only casual at the printers, while another man lay sick, and he gave a nod towards the smoke-stained windows. "I was working out there, sir, in the market, until a fortnight ago."

Mr. Faulkner tilted his hat still further back. He asked many questions, learning now that the person called Bowen was twenty-four years of age, that he had spent most of his life in the quiet little country town of Widmarsh, that he was now entirely dependent on his own resources, and so on.

"But, my dear fellow," said Mr. Faulkner, "to put the thing brutally, you are by way of being a gentleman."

"Yes, sir."

"Then what are your family thinking about?"

Bowen explained that he had no family, except one middle-aged female relative whose means were only sufficient for herself—barely sufficient. He flushed as he gave this part of his explanation, adding hurriedly that he had sponged on her far too long, being in ignorance of the real state of her affairs. She had always been extraordinarily good and generous to him, and the moment he made his discovery he determined to relieve her of all further expense on his account.

Mr. Faulkner laughed.

"This is amazing," he said. "This is colossal. But do not let me deceive myself," and he leaned right back in his chair. "Do I really stand, or rather sit, in presence of that typical character, that glorious symbolic personage, the young man who has come up to London from the country to make his fortune and conquer the world?"

"That's about it, sir;" and the young man laughed too.

"Shake. Shake—as they used to say in the land of the free." Mr. Faulkner had come forward in his chair and was stretching out his hand. "My dear friend, I have heard of you. I have delighted in you. But I always thought you were fictitious. I never really believed in you. And now you walk in—straight out of the pages of Balzac."

"Balzac's good, isn't he, sir?"

"What, you know Balzac? You read him?"

"Rather."

"In French?"

"Yes, sir. *Le Père Goriot. Cousin Pons.*"

Mr. Faulkner winced.

"Ah, you read French, but you don't speak it."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Your accent! Your accent is patriotically British. No matter."

At this point of the conversation Bowen decided that the redoubtable and magnificent editor had a sense of humour. He felt his hopes begin to rise.

"Come now," said the other, smiling, "what makes you think you could be useful here?"

"I have always wanted to be an author."

"Prodigious," said Faulkner, as if enraptured. "Cor-

rect to the last touch. The very words! 'I have always wanted to be an author.' "

Then, warmly encouraged to speak of his literary studies, Bowen modestly recounted how he had won a prize for composition at school, and had since contributed prose and poetry to local newspapers. A swollen pocket-book emerged from his shabby clothing and he produced cuttings.

Faulkner read one of his poems in a humorous manner, beating time to the cadence. It made the poet hot and cold.

"Ah, yes," and Mr. Faulkner laughed again. "That's all right. 'I love my love with a B and I took her to the Blue Boar at Bermondsey and gave her beans and bacon.' "

"Is it as bad as all that?"

"No, it's capital. Now look here. One more question —a question frank to the verge of blackguardism. Have you any better clothes?"

"Plenty. Oh, yes, I'd be quite presentable."

"Good. Then I won't detain you now. You understand, of course, that I am not my own master here."

But in saying this Mr. Faulkner had a tone that is never used except by people who are really quite independent of control.

A few days later Eric Bowen was summoned from the printing-house and formally engaged at a salary of four pounds a week.

He came to the office next morning dressed in a neat blue suit and sat all day at one of the two large tables

in the middle of the room, "picking up the hang of things" as advised by Mr. Cooke, the assistant editor. Mr. Faulkner was in the inner room. From the outer room came a steady clicking of the two typewriters, and the two girl typists were shouted for by Mr. Cooke or Mr. Faulkner at brief intervals of time. Both girls looked at the new member of the staff, and one of them, the bigger one, expressed approval to her companion.

"That's the nicest boy," she said confidentially, "that we are ever likely to see in this fusty old shop."

To Eric Bowen the place was not fusty, it was glorious, soul-satisfying. It was a newspaper office. Its very dust was pleasant to his nostrils, even when it made him sneeze. At night, after the long and yet too short day, he wrote a letter to his kind old spinster cousin, saying enthusiastically, "Is not life wonderful? Just when I was in danger of losing heart this splendid opening has come, and it will be my own fault now if I do not climb to the top of the ladder."

Experts would have told him no doubt that he had secured but a precarious foothold for climbing purposes, since, to those "in the know," the continued existence of the *Mayfair Gazette* was a source of wonder. Always they were expecting it to die, yet still it lived on. In sober fact quite recently it had been very near dissolution. Everybody at the office had been aware that all would soon be over unless some potentate came forward to save it. They offered the paper to all the potentates they could think of. Then marvellously, against every probability, Faulkner found one in John Cornish.

Cornish—as Bowen learned—had nothing to do with

the journalistic world, and he said he put in his few life-saving thousands for sentimental reasons. But no one believed Cornish.

Eric Bowen's earliest experience of a very bitter manner occasionally employed by his editor was when Faulkner discussed their benefactor. He was severe on Cornish, reporting his own abrupt treatment of the fellow; and finally tearing Cornish to pieces as an ugly type of the bloated profiteer. "Yes," said Faulkner, with a change to loftiness of style, "I am no respecter of persons."

Bowen admired Faulkner more than ever for preserving his stiff-necked attitude and refusing to bow down before mere money, even when a little of it had proved so useful to the concern.

He made of Faulkner his chosen hero, committing himself to a whole-hearted and most ardent kind of hero-worship, and for a long time finding no possible fault in the worshipped one. Even then, when a few regrettable circumstances were vaguely surmised, they were altogether insufficient to make the young man ever think of erecting another temple and finding another god to put in it.

He regretted that Faulkner—as he assumed perhaps without evidence—was probably leading out of office hours what they called at Widmarsh a fast life, that he consorted with attractive unvirtuous ladies who for the moment adored him, but took no proper care of him, and of course made no semblance of a home for him; also that he sometimes sat up all night playing cards, and that on certain nights he drank rather more than was good for him and appeared pale and shaky next morning in conse-

quence, and lastly that he was perhaps too negligent with regard to cash transactions—at any rate, that when he borrowed money from anybody for taxi fares or boxes of cigarettes he forgot all about it until reminded. On the other hand, he was a most brilliant gifted creature, a "celebrity," a personage occasionally mentioned in newspapers—in ladies' newspapers especially. Beyond all this he was the man who had given Bowen his chance in life.

"He is just perfect," Bowen used to say to himself.

Being of a naturally affectionate disposition, further than gratefully admiring him, Bowen felt very fond of him, and the first flaw in an otherwise complete happiness was caused by the fact that the editor proved entirely unresponsive to any overtures that might lead to friendship. Thoughts of Faulkner's coldness troubled him. Nevertheless he continued to woo his favour. He glowed with satisfaction when Faulkner condescended to speak to him or of him chaffingly—as for instance, "How goes it, my world-conqueror?" or "Where is our lad from the plough-tail?"—because it seemed that these condescensions might be the beginning of friendliness. Next minute, however, Faulkner would be curt, aloof, almost uncivil, speaking as though to a stranger and an underling. Yet still by many little thoughtful acts and services Bowen endeavoured to show his regard.

After three or four months Bowen accustomed his mind to everything. He was punctiliously polite; he rose and remained standing when Faulkner approached; he resumed the habit of addressing him as Sir. But then one day Faulkner unexpectedly begged him to sit down and not be an ass.

Sometimes Faulkner would unexpectedly abandon all reserve, and, addressing the whole office, discourse with the utmost gusto and in the most cynically amusing style. One Thursday evening in February, when the paper had been "put to bed" and it was nearly closing time, he began to talk and he went on talking for more than an hour. He harangued them, either seriously or facetiously, on ethics, manners, and the prevailing prejudices that influence both. Mr. Manager Rice was overwhelmed by it; Mr. Cooke flustered himself with noisy opposing arguments; the senior typist breathed hard and once or twice gasped wrathfully.

And all the while young Mr. Bowen, seated at his table, had listened and admired without cessation. "He is just magnificent," Eric Bowen thought. "I would go through fire and water for him."

At last, as it seemed, Mr. Faulkner was about to depart. With his coat thrown over his shoulder, his hat jerked far back on his head, he stood before the fire in the middle room, warming his thin legs and yawning. Rice and Cooke had already left the premises. In their own room the two girls made a horrible clatter with the covers of the typewriters as a signal that they too wished to go. They could not go before the editor went.

Then Mr. Cooke returned. It appeared that he had been stung with the thought of things he ought to have said to Faulkner, but hadn't said, and he came hurrying back to resume the debate and to triumph. He spoke with a truculent vigour as he pushed through the outer door.

"Mr. Faulkner! You said just now that there's no such thing as morality."

"Pardon me, I never said anything so idiotic. What I did say was that morality is a question of geographical situation."

"Oh, words—words," said Mr. Cooke, rendered furious by the onset of the same confused sensation that had interfered with his argumentative power ten minutes ago. "*You'd* talk the hind leg off a donkey."

"I will not make the obvious but unflattering retort," said Faulkner, with a grave smile. Then he changed his tone and spoke after the style of an indulgent teacher addressing a small pupil. "Where is your difficulty, Cooke? What is it that puzzles you? You strike me as being angry as much on my account as on your own—as though you were enraged by me and yet sorry for me at the same time."

"Yes, I *am* sorry to hear you give off such dangerous nonsense"

"But I am not personally advocating crime or sin."

"I should hope not."

"This is philosophy, not private opinion."

"Oh, so long as it isn't to be applied to practical life," said Mr. Cooke, mollified, "well, then I make no objection. Yes, I dare say there isn't any great difference between us."

"The only difference between you and me," said Faulkner, "is the size of our hats—and the quality of the brains we keep inside the hats."

Miss Shaw, the more youthful of the typists, gave a laugh, and Miss Williams, who was in the doorway of their room, turned to admonish her with a whisper. "Stow it. Don't encourage them."

"Your last remark," said Mr. Cooke, reddening instead of laughing, "is neither pointed nor funny. It is vulgar rudeness."

"I regret if I'm vulgar," said Faulkner genially, "and I had no intention of being rude. My dear fellow, what are we talking about? These moral notions of ours! Truly they are codes that belong to localities. They are not based on logic, but on convenience, or, as I said, on fashion. An action that is reprehensible here in London may be permitted and even considered meritorious in another country and under another sky. Take the relations of the sexes. But no, we won't take them, since there are ladies present. Let us stick to fashion, which nowadays blends with morality—which perhaps *is* morality. Consider the parts of the body that modest well-behaved females disclose without any covering garments. Miss Williams over there when attending a dance hides much of her legs, but offers for inspection the larger part of her back in a state of nudity. Because it is the fashion that is right and proper. But in the South Sea Islands dancers go naked from head to feet, and if Miss Williams lived in the South Sea Islands she would unhesitatingly follow the bigger fashion."

"That's a lie," said Miss Williams warmly.

"Of course you would, my dear. I take Miss Williams as the type of supreme respectability and correct behaviour. She governs herself according to the prevailing convention. Externally she is perfectly docile, and although within she may be a volcano of rebellious thoughts and fierce primitive instincts she can be trusted—"

"Oh, you mind your own business," said Miss Williams

loudly, and she glared and breathed hard, while the sound of Miss Shaw's laughter was again heard.

"My business is the world," said Faulkner, with a tolerant smile, "and all human nature is my particular province. Thus, Miss Williams, your very simple character becomes for a passing moment worthy of dissection. But enough;" and he went on to snub Miss Williams rather cruelly. "Meeting your limited intelligence, I will condescend to a *tu quoque*. In regard to minding one's business, I shall be obliged if you on your side will concern yourself more strictly with matters pertaining to your appointment. I shall be further obliged if you will keep that door shut. Above all, I shall be obliged if in future you will refrain from joining in the conversation unless you are expressly invited to do so;" and he made a superbly dignified gesture of dismissal.

Miss Williams snorted and withdrew, banging the door behind her.

"Come on, Cooke," and the editor gave his assistant a friendly pat on the shoulder. "We'll walk together—tarrying a space in that haunt you wot of to drink together. . . . No, do not recoil. It is my privilege to pay to-night, because you won the argument. You always do."

And the two men went out.

Eric Bowen sat musing at his table. In these last few moments he had been unquestionably dissatisfied with his hero. It had seemed unkind to worry Cooke, who was honest, but only half educated, and of course not quite a gentleman. It had seemed unkind too to nag Miss Wil-

liams and sit upon her so heavily after calling her "My dear." And the final offer to Cooke of a drink? Surely that was a pity. Also his omission of a good-night or any other parting word to him, Eric Bowen!

Then he once more banished doubt, and after reinforcing himself with his formula, "Yes, I would go through fire and water for him," he began to think of something else. He thought of his strength, his health, his freedom from fatigue no matter how hard he worked. He thought of the wonder, the unfolding joy of his life. With these youthful and innocent thoughts there came a smile on his lips; and he continued to smile, in complete ignorance of the fact that Miss Williams had reopened her door to make sure, as she expressed it, of the coast being clear, and that she was regarding him with a stealthily kind intentness. He seemed to her singularly attractive in his state of smiling unconsciousness, and frank, open, good, just what a young man of twenty-four ought to be.

Suddenly he raised his head.

"Oh, Miss Williams, run along. I'll close the shop. Sorry you have been kept waiting."

"Thank you, Mr. Bowen. You'll give the keys to Mrs. Andrews?"

"Yes. I won't forget."

But the next moment she stood at his elbow, clutching her hand-bag close against her well-developed bosom. She was a biggish, rather stout girl, with blue eyes and a large mouth, a kindly industrious creature, as Bowen knew.

"What is it, Miss Williams?"

"How he does run on—that Faulkner. Sickening!"

And she spoke with unexpected force. "I hope I'm not taking a liberty, but if I was you I shouldn't trust him further than you can see him."

Young Mr. Bowen was so much startled that he could only stare and blush.

"B'lieve me," she continued, with the same vigour, "he's not your sort. He's a Bo'emian, to begin with. I could tell you things about him."

"Please don't. He is our chief. It would be as unbecoming in you to say them as in me to hear them."

"Oh, for goodness' sake don't get talking like he does. You said that just exactly as if you were copying his way —so damn superior, putting everybody in their place, and as if everything was a joke to him. But I didn't come to talk of Faulkner. It was an impulse." And she clutched at her hand-bag. "You'll find him out in due time and season, same as everybody else does. What I wanted to say—" She became shy, and hesitated. "It's only this. I've been given some theatre tickets by the advertisement people. Two for to-night. *Dolly's Dilemma!* I suppose you wouldn't care to come with me?"

Eric Bowen gently refused the invitation.

"You don't mind me asking?"

"How could I mind?" But he did mind, really. It was one of those tiny insidious wounds not to one's vanity, but to one's ambition. Evidently Miss Williams's estimate of the position that he had already achieved and the grandeurs he would soon reach was much smaller than his own. "Mind! Of course not. I think it's extremely good of you."

"Do you?" And her face brightened. "I've two more

for Tuesday. *The Live Wire!* High-brow, you know. That any good to you?"

But Mr. Bowen excused himself for Tuesday also; and Miss Williams went downstairs pressing the hand-bag to her ample chest more tightly than ever.

"It's you to come with me, not him," she announced to Miss Shaw.

"I never expected otherwise," said Miss Shaw. "Honestly, I wonder you had the cheek to ask him."

"Oh, he was very nice about it. He's always nice. He's nice through and through, that boy is." And Miss Williams sighed. "I hope he won't ever fall into bad hands."

II

"If you are doing nothing to-morrow night," said Faulkner on Monday, "will you come to dinner—with me and my old woman?"

"Your old woman?" said Bowen, echoing the words that had staggered him; and he remained inarticulate, not daring to utter the questions that throbbed within him—"What old woman? Do you mean your housekeeper? Or is it your mother? Or can you possibly mean—"

"My wife," said Faulkner, answering the unspoken question with a slight embarrassment.

"Oh, I didn't know you were married."

"Didn't you?"

"No, on my honour," said Bowen, rather idiotically. "I never once guessed that you were married. I always thought of you as a bachelor."

Faulkner shrugged his shoulders, as if implying that till now there had been no occasion to mention a circumstance of such trifling importance. Then he gave his private address. "Chelsea, you know—close to the river. We pig it with the artists and other riffraff. We're on the fourth floor—because there isn't a fifth. The rents are lower as you go higher. But, by the way, they don't give us a lift. Come straight up. You won't feel it at your age. Eight o'clock;" and he laughed and went into his room.

Bowen sat down to work with the tips of his ears

tingling and a prickly heat all over his body. He felt proud and happy. He had been asked to dinner by Faulkner. There can be no suggestion of disloyalty in saying that he was more elated than if he had received a command from their Majesties to attend a state banquet at Buckingham Palace.

All that day and the next day he was readjusting his ideas in regard to his hero. The notion of Faulkner as a lonely soul was of course shattered. He, Faulkner, possessed a home, with a woman in it, the same woman month after month, always, to look to his food and comfort, to take care of him. But then obviously she did not do it. She neglected her duty; she allowed him to be untidy, irregular in his habits, often at a loose end; she did not save him from *feeling* lonely. What sort of a woman could she be? Worrying hard at this problem, Eric Bowen at last felt fairly certain that Faulkner had married beneath him, probably, too, a person much older than himself, and by now she had become no better than a horrid millstone round poor F's neck. These suppositions dovetailed nicely with that just perceived embarrassment of his friend, the shrug of the shoulders, and the use of the term "old woman." The adjective and the tone together indicated plainness, humbleness. They were intended to prepare the guest. Thinking in this manner, Bowen firmly resolved to be very, very kind to Mrs. Faulkner; chivalrously so, never by the slightest sign showing that she was "not quite quite," as snobbish people used to say; and if afterwards Faulkner made any deprecating remark, he would swear he had not noticed anything odd, and that he thought the lady delightful.

"Unconventional, but charming"—that would be a useful phrase.

Nothing had been said about costume. But, "to be on the safe side," he decided for a dinner jacket and black tie.

A well-apparelled and rather pretty maid-servant admitted him to the small square hall of the flat, and he had an immediate impression of light, good taste, great comfort. While he was taking off his overcoat and scarf nervousness assailed him, and at the sound of voices coming to him through an open doorway he felt a distressing qualm. Ought he to have put on a white tie and a long coat after all? Those voices belonged to females—a girl or a child, and a woman. The woman's voice was very musical, with a changing tone that deepened suddenly. Then it broke into a low gurgling laugh.

"You silly idiotic girl," it said, or something of that sort, in the midst of the laugh. And then the maid-servant led him through the doorway.

Next moment he was shaking hands with the greatest surprise of his life.

"How kind of you to come," said Mrs. Faulkner. "Cyril has been promising for months that he would try to persuade you."

"Oh, no," said Bowen, in a feeble mutter of shyness. "It's most awfully kind of you to let me come."

She introduced him to the girl, saying the name Daphne and some other name that he did not catch; and no doubt he bowed to the girl or shook hands with her, but he was not conscious of this. Mrs. Faulkner filled the whole zone of consciousness because of the shock she had given

by her unexpectedness. She was probably about thirty-two, and possibly a little more; she had black hair; she was pale, tall, thin rather than plump. She was incomparably well-bred, with easy gracious manners; she was in fact, as crowds of invisible people all round the room seemed to be telling him, the most charming woman he had ever met. Further than this, she was splendid—splendid in a troubling, glittering way that he did not at once understand. Then he saw that it was her dress which gave the splendour, a dress of shining purple colour that shone and burst into white flames because of the silver embroidery on it. With this recognition came an anguish that only very young people ever suffer. The qualm of the hall had developed into an agonized conviction that he himself was improperly or inadequately attired; the surrounding multitude of unseen critics seemed to draw in, pointing at him, staring at him.

Then Faulkner came into the room, very friendly and gay, wearing a black tie, and Eric Bowen felt better.

Presently they went across the hall to another room and sat down to dinner.

At once they were all talking. Faulkner was witty and scathing; the girl Daphne giggled and chattered; in a minute Mrs. Faulkner had said half a dozen things of which each was sufficient to make Bowen realise that as well as being so attractive she was also brilliantly clever. When they began to speak of books and plays, the charm of her, the life of her, her enthusiasms and contempts, overwhelmed him. Only a man of the world like her husband could deserve to hold her attention or be worthy of conversing with her. He himself was pitiably aware

of an ignorance and rawness that must of necessity put him beneath contempt. He thought desolately, "She is a woman that can't help knocking a man down at first sight; only she is so jolly decent that she stoops and picks him up, and then as soon as he is on his feet and recovering himself she knocks him down again. She is—well, such a stunner."

Her name was Fernande. Faulkner said "my dear Fernande"; the girl said "Fernande darling." It seemed to Bowen that if anything could be required to complete her, if anything could render perfection a shade more perfect, it would be this name. Fernande!

Her hair was not really black. No, black was altogether too harsh a word. But it was *very* dark—parted in the middle, drawn back severely and rolled tightly about her ears, hiding them. The darkness of her hair made her look pale—and probably she was powdered too. Her nose was beautiful, nearly but not quite aquiline, not a bit too long; it gave her a classical aspect sometimes. When she turned her head and he saw the face in profile she was distinctly classical, like people on urns and friezes, suggesting unmeasured time and fabulous civilizations; when she turned round to him she was like some famous tragic actress, but very modern, symbolising the tragedy of intellects at war, not the tragedy that belongs to physical pain. Yet if she really acted on a stage she would be greatest of all in pure comedy. He imagined her eyes. He had not dared to look at them inquisitively, but he believed that once or twice there had been laughter in them. And his thoughts for a few moments wandered. He asked himself if laughing eyes truly exist. They are so de-

scribed in novels—"Her face was grave, but her eyes laughed."

Cyril was becoming bitter about a much praised writer, and they all talked of new or newish books. What bothered Eric frightfully was that he had read none of these books and had never heard of their authors. Nevertheless he could not remain outside of the animated conversation. At last he heard himself holding forth in what sounded as a most abominable theatrical voice, not the voice of a professional, but of an amateur, an amateur imperfect in his lines. He was telling them of his favourite novelists, "the ones that have helped me most," and to his horror he found he could not stop. The three others were listening and he wanted to stop, but still went on, about Anthony Trollope, Rhoda Broughton, Mrs. Humphrey Ward, R. L. Stevenson.

Then he stammered and became mute. Mrs. Faulkner had stopped him, with her eyes. He had seen them now. She was looking at him searchingly with those darkly luminous eyes—and, yes, there was laughter in them.

"But, my dear Mr. Bowen," she said, "don't you know that these helpful friends of yours are all dead and buried?"

"Can't an author be any good after he's dead? I thought it was all the other way round."

"Not after he is really dead. Of course some authors only come to life after death. But those you mention have gone on dying—and now that they are all comfortably buried, oh, so deep, it is a desecration of the tomb, it is sacrilege, to—"

"Shut up, Fernande," said Faulkner. "You are overstepping the bounds of hospitality."

Eric Bowen looked from one to the other. Faulkner had his whimsical expression, with eyes half closed and little lines running about the corners of his mouth. He glanced at Bowen as if proud of him, delighting in him, and immensely amused with him.

"I told you," he said to his wife, "that our friend is rather angelic on the subject of literature."

Then they all laughed, and Eric realised that they were mocking at his opinions, that they thought them idiotic. He blushed and for a moment felt wounded, but then Fernande Faulkner made everything all right again.

"Mr. Bowen," she said, still smiling, "please don't think us hatefully rude. You're splendid, really, in your fidelity to the old favourites. It is we who are the rotters—without faith or loyalty, always hunting for what's new and strange, or somehow startling."

"Tell her about Thackeray," said Faulkner, with a frank good-humoured laugh.

"I *love* Thackeray," said the girl.

"So do I," said Mrs. Faulkner; and they all three talked of this buried master, praising him in the most generous style.

Coffee was brought in little golden cups, and liqueurs in queer-shaped bottles. Mrs. Faulkner fitted a cigarette into a long holder and smoked it gracefully, beautifully. It was a pleasure to watch her smoking. On the other hand the girl Daphne smoked odiously, puffing out her cheeks till her face looked like a small white pudding. She put back her head sometimes and tried to make smoke

rings, but couldn't, and at other times she blew the smoke down through her nose and sneezed.

Also she told in rapid succession three very improper anecdotes, one with a bad oath to heighten its distastefulness. Faulkner laughed cordially, but his wife reproved her.

"What is it?" said Daphne, giggling. "Have I dropped a brick?"

"No, my cherub," said Faulkner. "Go on. Tell us some more."

But again Mrs. Faulkner protested.

"Cyril, you're not to encourage her. She only does it out of bravado, but she oughtn't to do it. And you know very well that I don't like it."

"Darling Fernande, I apologise, I grovel—" The girl seemed contrite and ashamed. "You know I'd tear my tongue out by the roots sooner than offend you. Oh, forgive me—say you forgive me."

Mrs. Faulkner said that Daphne was forgiven, that there was nothing to forgive, and that she was a ridiculous child.

They sat so long at the table that when they got up at last it was late, and the girl announced that she must go at once.

She went. She had been there, as Bowen knew, and she had gone. She was of no importance. He himself had made an offer of departure, but Mrs. Faulkner would not accept it. He must stay and talk to her while Cyril did a little work.

They were alone for a minute or two in the drawing-room, and during this brief space of time she somehow

let him understand that as well as being very fond of Cyril she was frequently anxious about him. She further conveyed her thought or belief that Bowen would be a staunch ally in promoting Cyril's welfare. "He *needs* people to help him. So many have played him false. But you'll stick to him, won't you?"

As she said this she was standing by the fireplace, and Bowen noticed her tallness and erectness, the beautiful poise of her head, the dignity of her whole attitude. He felt small, insignificant, like a subject being addressed by a queen, and he was about to make the most fervent vows of loyalty to her royal consort when he was interrupted.

Cyril had come back to them, smoking a pipe and wearing a fearful shabby old grey jacket.

"It's an article that I swore I'd do for the *Nineteenth Century*," said Cyril. "If I don't finish it now, I never shall"; and he sat down at a desk and immediately started scribbling.

Mrs. Faulkner and Eric Bowen sat upon a sofa, one at each end of it, with cigarettes and matches on a little table close by.

"I said we shouldn't disturb him"; and she pointed at her husband. "Isn't he wonderful? We have ceased to exist for him. Yet the misfortune is that it's so terribly difficult to make him concentrate. But he promised me he would to-night. You won't think it rude?"

Bowen did not think it rude. But again surprise was afflicting him, another sort of surprise. Of a sudden her dignity had gone from her, and, as it seemed, her beauty and gracefulness as well. Her tone in speaking of Cyril had been motherly and protective, and now it was matter-

of-fact, businesslike, as she invited Bowen to go on smoking. "There. Nothing like making oneself comfortable;" and clasping her hands behind her neck, she leaned back against the sofa cushions.

Eric Bowen thought, "This beats everything. She isn't even good-looking. Nobody except myself would have fancied her peculiar style. I suppose it must have been something that appealed to me especially, just at first. I am too romantic. I always was. I must cure that."

"Now tell me about yourself," she said, smiling lazily. "I know a great deal. But I want to fill in the gaps. Is it true that you worked as a labourer?"

He told her his little story artlessly and modestly.

He went on talking, and Mrs. Faulkner unclasped her hands and smoked many cigarettes.

Then presently he said something to the effect that in any event he would have been glad to get away from the country because he had had a disappointment down there.

"But, Mr. Bowen,"—and he saw that her eyes were laughing again,—"you mustn't bother about your disappointment. I feel sure she wasn't worthy of you."

This threw him into temporary confusion.

"I can't deny—Mrs. Faulkner—that it was—er—that sort of disappointment. But I don't know how on earth you guessed."

"What other sort of disappointment could it be, Mr. Bowen?" And she laughed softly.

"How are you children getting on?" said Cyril. He had risen from his desk, and after relighting a pipe he walked about the room. "Fernande, I'm tired."

"Are you?" she said gently and compassionately. "But go on with it, Cyril. Bang it through."

Cyril went back to his desk and continued working.

It was an hour before he spoke again. Then he rose abruptly and stretched himself.

"There, old girl, I have done the damned thing."

"Bravo," said Mrs. Faulkner, and she scrambled from the sofa and went to him. "Let me have it. I'll do all the rest."

"God, I'm tired," said Faulkner, while his manuscript was being arranged and folded.

On this hint the guest bade them good-night.

"You'll come again, Mr. Bowen, won't you?" and her voice sounded coldly on his ear.

Then, as Cyril helped him with his overcoat and muffler, he glanced back through the open doorway and saw her standing in the middle of the room. All her beauty had returned to her. She looked tragically beautiful. It was one more surprise for him.

III

When a man lifts the curtain that has hitherto concealed his intimate private life he cannot, if he wishes, easily drop it again; and when he has admitted another man into his very home and there sat at meat with him, it infallibly happens that the relations between the two are changed. They may have been almost strangers before; but henceforth they must be something like friends or something not unlike enemies.

Between Eric Bowen and Cyril Faulkner all barriers seemed to have been broken down. The knowledge that he was really liked gave the younger man confidence, and nothing in Faulkner's outward manner could now wound or embarrass him.

It was now three days since the little dinner-party and all this time Bowen had been thinking about Mrs. Faulkner, but her husband had never once spoken of her. Bowen had a feeling that perhaps it was a rule that she should never be mentioned at the office.

On the fourth day, however, he broke the rule, if it existed.

Looking at his editor tenderly, he asked a question. "Faulkner, I have been wondering. Do you remember one night when you said you had nothing to do and nowhere to go? Did you mean that Mrs. Faulkner was out —or away?"

"Yes—probably. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I was only thinking. . . . I say—" and Bowen exhibited some of his old shyness.

"Well?"

Then Bowen said, very shyly, that he intended, or wished, to call and pay his respects to Mrs. Faulkner. He described the proposed ceremony as his *visite de digestion.*

Faulkner winced, as he did always when Bowen talked French, but he spoke kindly.

"My dear chap, it isn't in the least necessary."

"But I should like to—if I may. Would Mrs. Faulkner be in to-day after tea?"

"Undoubtedly. . . . Yes, go by all means if the spirit so moves you. It's very polite of you, anyhow."

It was nearly six o'clock when the polite visitor climbed the dimly lighted staircase to the Chelsea flat. All was dark and dismal. Then light showed through the glass panels of the door, and the maid-servant opened it.

"Not at home," said the maid, in a tone so firm as to sound aggressive, and she repeated the information. "Mrs. Faulkner is out."

"Will Mrs. Faulkner be coming back before dinner?"

"Oh, I couldn't say, sir. No, I'm sure I don't know, sir."

He left two of his visiting cards and went away feeling grievously disappointed. He had not known till now how much he was longing for an interview, in spite of his dread of being stupid and conversationally awkward. He walked dully and heavily as far as Sloane Square; but there he grew cheerful and excited, brightening to a happy idea. He had thought of something that would

lift the visit from the sheer tameness of abortive efforts and dissipate his own sense of defeat.

He went into a flower shop, purchased sprays of lilies of the valley, caused them to be tied together with purple ribbon, and then carried the fragrant parcel back to the Chelsea flat.

This time it was Mrs. Faulkner herself who opened the door to him.

He scarcely recognised her—this person in a dressing gown, with loose tumbling hair and a hard face. For a moment she looked like a haggard middle-aged woman staring at him inimically.

"Good gracious, it's you, Mr. Bowen." He had murmured an apology as he offered her the flowers, and she took them from him with a gracious gesture. "How extraordinarily kind of you. Come in. I wasn't really out just now. But you should have said you were coming—telephoned—or something."

She led him into the drawing-room, and as he followed her he felt more than unhappy, miserable. The room was fireless and desolate, totally different from what it had appeared when he last saw it. The air of taste and of a comfort that merged into luxury was here no longer. The desk where Cyril had written was untidy, littered with papers; there were books and more papers on the floor; the sofa cushions seemed shabby, worn out. A single electric light showed these things and yet made other things vague or obscure. Eric had the sensation of one who knows theatres only from the auditorium at night, and then is taken upon the stage in the daytime, when a rehearsal is progressing. But far worse to him

than the loss of glamour in the scenic decorations was the appalling belittlement of the leading lady of the piece as caught thus, not made up, without paint and powder, in ordinary unromantic attire. Every illusion had been taken from him. He thought with a regret that was as sharp as pain, "Why, she is nothing at all. I must have been mad to admire her."

Nevertheless she was treating him very kindly, saving him from a further trouble of mind in the thought that his unfortunate intrusion was a crime, a blunder—a solecism that a man of the world would somehow have avoided.

"It's too good of you. . . . No, you must stay. But don't take off your coat at once. This room is cold."

The maid came in, knelt on the hearth, lit the fire. It crackled and spluttered noisily. One after another all the electric lights were turned on until the room blazed with light, dazzling him. Mrs. Faulkner began to arrange the flowers in two slender vases, slowly and delicately, talking all the while.

"Is it too late to give you tea? . . . Anything else? . . . Then smoke. . . . The cigarettes are somewhere. . . . Did a fairy whisper to you to buy lilies of the valley? I love lilies. And this pretty ribbon—my favourite purple."

"Yes," he said, "you wore a purple dress. That's why I chose it."

"You don't mean that you remembered my dress?"

"Of course I did. I asked for a purple ribbon with silver on it. But they couldn't do the silver."

"You're terribly observant. . . . But you shouldn't have wasted your money."

She said this in an absent-minded tone. She was engrossed with the arrangement of the flowers, handling them softly, carefully, as if indeed she loved them. He stood there watching her, seeing the lamplight through loose strands of her dark hair, the light upon her smooth white forehead, the bare arm that came out of the loose sleeves, round, smooth, beautifully shaped.

The fire was burning well, the maid had left them, they were alone; and before his eyes there occurred a slowly developing transfiguration. It was like a miracle when fully accomplished. In the strong light of the room flaming colours issued from the folds of her oriental dressing-gown; her face, that had seemed hard, softened, melted, then settled itself to a kind of brilliant calmness. She looked more unique, more wonderful, than at the dinner.

"Sit down and talk to me," she said. "Talk to me just as you did the other night. Let us begin where we left off."

She seated herself on the sofa, in the old place, and leaned back against the cushions in the old way, and immediately it seemed to him that he had known her for a great number of years and that there was nothing in the least unfamiliar or strange about her. Nevertheless she was different. Instead of her manner suggesting the protective or motherly instincts, it conveyed an impression of something slightly masculine. The tone of her voice, its freedom and carelessness, made her seem like a boy speak-

ing to another boy, and there passed through his mind the memory of a real boy, a boy called Cartwright, who had been at school with him and of whom he had been fond.

"Take off your coat now. . . . Do what I ask you. And sit down."

He obeyed her, seating himself at the other end of the sofa and thinking, "She is fascinating. That's what she is. It isn't looks, it's charm. She has Cyril's charm—to the nth power."

"Now I want some more of Mr. Bowen's autobiography," and she smiled. " 'Young Mr. Bowen,' as your editor calls you—or 'our Mr. Bowen.' "

"Mr. Bowen is of less than no consequence," he said, laughing. Then he pulled himself together, and conscious of his audacity, yet not quailing, he added, "But Mr. Bowen would very much like to hear all about Mrs. Faulkner. This time please tell me about yourself."

"Oh, there's nothing to tell," she said abruptly, frowning.

While she frowned her face hardened again. Then she pushed her hair back from her forehead and shrugged her shoulders; and he thought, "She is like Cyril. That was exactly like Cyril shrugging his shoulders and tilting his hat." And as she went on talking he thought, "This is a thing that I observed last time—she says I am observant—but somehow failed to recollect. She has many tricks that she has caught from Cyril. They always said that husbands and wives grow alike. . . . It is astounding what an amount of scorn they can both of them put into their faces; but her scorn is finer, there is nobility in it, it's scorn for ideas, abstract conceptions; whereas old

Cyril is scornful about people and things, his scorn is bitter, with a little cruelty in it."

He was studying her now, trying to learn her, as people study abstruse books or learn some rather difficult new game. He thought, when she laughed, that perhaps her charm, such as it was, really lay in her voice. It was the very first thing that he had registered—before he had seen her and been struck stupid in surprise by her,—a certain deepening note of her voice heard through the open door. It affected him at once. Thinking of it, reasoning about it, he remembered how he had been affected by Madame Clara Butt's singing at the grand concert at Reading two years ago.

"I don't believe you're listening to a word I say."

"Indeed I am. . . . No, that's not true. But I will now. I wasn't listening to you, I was thinking about you," and he blushed.

"You ought to be able to do both at once, Mr. Bowen."

Whether the charm lay in voice, manner, aspect, or in other and unanalysable attributes, he presently surrendered himself to it. She made him talk, she made him prattle. Soon he said just what she pleased, without reticence, as if to that old school friend Cartwright.

"I suppose, Mr. Bowen, that you have always been tumbling into love and tumbling out again."

"Yes, I suppose I have—tumbling quickly and getting up slowly."

"Ever since you were seven or eight?"

"Yes. I always used to fall in love with women absurdly older than myself."

"Oh, splendid," she said. "That's most promising."

"Why?"

"Because I fulfill your requirements, of course. But, Mr. Bowen, you mustn't fall in love with me. In my case you must resist the lure of advanced age."

He blushed furiously, but yet was not unhappy or uncomfortable.

"Oh, don't be shy about it," she said, smiling. "Such a very obvious fact! Shall I tell you how old I am exactly?"

"No, I don't want to know. I never want to know." He said this with great earnestness.

"That's rather sweet of you," and she looked at him. "But you *are* sweet, you know."

He was about to say, "Not at all," but something of joy or pride that had sprung to life at her words and now thrilled in his breast debarred him from immediate speech, however stereotyped or automatic. There was a silence that he felt to be too long. Before he could break it she was talking again.

"Tell me of your disaster. The grand affair that ended badly."

Once more he obeyed her, narrating his Widmarsh romance and its oppressively sad conclusion.

"What was she like?" asked Fernande. "Was she skinny? Or with a ridge of plumpness across her shoulders, like such a lot of girls nowadays? They won't stand up properly. But what does it matter what she was like? In your eyes she was adorable. You had made her your princess. . . . Well? Go on with it."

"There is no more."

"Then listen, Mr. Bowen"; and her voice and eyes

were serious, meditative. "That girl didn't hurt you, really. She shook you up and did you good. It was because of her that you determined to do deeds."

"Yes, that's true."

"And now you must do the deeds. You mustn't falter or hesitate in your determination. I am older than you—no, I won't tell you how much—and I implore you not to fail by taking life too easily. Don't be like Cyril, and let things slide."

"Ah, Cyril! If only I was gifted like Cyril, what wouldn't I do?"

"Yes, Cyril has great gifts." She said this very gravely. "There is nothing that Cyril could not have done—and in comparison with what might have been, he hasn't done anything at all."

Rising from the sofa, she moved to the fireplace, and Eric understood that he was dismissed. He did not apologise for staying an immense time because he saw in the ease and completeness of his dismissal, now it had come, the fact that if she had not wished him to stay, it would have come sooner.

"Good-night, Mrs. Faulkner;" and to indicate that he was aware of the length of his visit and grateful for the license allowed him, he said something to the effect that he was wondering why Cyril had not yet appeared.

She made a gesture, but did not speak.

"Aren't you expecting him back to dinner?"

"I never expect him till I see him."

"Oh, really? . . . I wonder where he is."

"At his club, I should think, playing cards—and losing money." Suddenly her face was eloquent with scorn,

and she turned her head as if to hide something that she had not intended to show. "Good-night, young Mr. Bowen."

Then he left the room without touching her hand and let himself out of the flat unaided.

He walked slowly away, intoxicated.

IV

The days passed, and he did not see Mrs. Faulkner again. Then Cyril announced quite casually that she had gone to Monte Carlo. During a few moments Eric had the blank consternation that one feels when one hears of a catastrophe which concerns other people rather than oneself, as in the case of a public misfortune, a bad railway accident, a destructive city fire. But after those few moments he felt that it did concern him, and he said to himself, "I am glad."

He understood that he had been in danger of allowing this brilliantly clever lady to become an "obsession." He had idealised her. She was richly endowed, but he had given her more exalted qualities than she possessed. However, he recollected with gratitude the advice she had offered so charmingly. The whole point of it was that he should work harder than he was doing.

Eric determined to turn over another new leaf.

Soon everybody at the office of the *Mayfair Gazette* became aware of the frenzy with which he was now labouring. He did his own work, and wanted to do the work of all the rest of them. They humoured his whim. They praised him—and then began to show that he was boring them.

Now that Bowen was doing so much work himself, he saw more and more clearly how little work was done by Faulkner. But Faulkner, if idle, was not lazy. He

worked rapidly and well whenever he did work. It was marvellous how he improved everybody's stuff by the editorial touch that he gave to it here and there. Often, too, he sat scribbling for an hour at a time. Then Bowen discovered that on such occasions he was not working for his own paper, but for some other paper. Sometimes when asked to do a "fill-in" he would throw off a most amusing little dialogue, or a descriptive sketch of an odd corner of London, or some pretty easy-flowing verses. He read one of these hurried efforts to Bowen, and when Bowen declared it was magnificent, he said, "I believe you're right. Anyhow it's too good for this rag." And he made Miss Williams ring up the *Daily Mail*, or the *Evening Standard*, and offer the little gem "with Mr. Faulkner's compliments."

Many, many things Bowen found out now in regard to Faulkner. But whatever he thought of his discoveries, they in no way lessened his affection for the chieftain.

As may be guessed, the guilty secret of the *Mayfair Gazette* was its circulation, or, more properly speaking, its want of circulation. There was immense labour on the ground floor in sending out gratis copies, and on Friday and Saturday one could see large parcels that were labelled "Colonial" and that disappeared somewhere or other on their way, as it was alleged, to a wide distribution throughout the oversea dominions of the empire. But about these colonial parcels Mr. Rice once remarked that "Least said soonest mended." Mr. Rice, with his drooping moustache and eternal cigarette, was industrious but almost illiterate. He described himself as "temp'ramental," and, although generally sanguine, was subject to

fits of depression. For the rest, he was supposed to be too fond of Mrs. Andrews, his silent female assistant, and he was certainly too fond of having snacks of odorous food cooked for him at odd hours. As Faulkner said, "In Rice's department it is always tea-time."

Bowen, not being given sufficient work upstairs, obtained permission to aid Mr. Rice on the business side, and was cordially welcomed downstairs. He made lists for Rice and compiled data as to advertisers as yet untouched.

"This gives me new heart," said Mr. Rice. "If you were temp'ramental like me, you'd know what it means to get a bit of support. I don't get it from *him*." And he nodded in an upward direction. "No, obstacles thrown in my way all the time," and he lowered his voice. "Going behind me, too. Yes, Mr. Faulkner has done me down proper in certain quarters. Times and often I've made up me mind to tackle him, but I haven't done it. He's a rum 'un to tackle, Mr. Faulkner is."

One Friday afternoon Bowen courageously went forth to make his début as a canvasser. His opening speech was delivered in a very smart ladies' hat shop in Bond Street. There were only women in the shop—Mrs. Marden, the proprietress, and the several young ladies, her subordinates. All these were presently clustered round Mr. Bowen, as he unfolded the last number of the *Gazette* on an ormolu and ebony table at the back of the shop. He went through the paper with them displaying all its old features; and he left the shop with an advertisement order in his pocket. Amazed but delighted by his triumph, he continued the canvass, and an hour later

obtained another order, from a well-known firm of stationers. It was too late to do more, and he hurried back to Covent Garden.

Mr. Rice and Mrs. Andrews were enjoying tea and a kipper in the further recess of the basement; and although much praise was given, it did not seem to Eric Bowen quite sufficient for so tremendous a stroke.

"Never!" said Rice. "Well, upon my word! What next! I said you were a knock-out. Two orders! Shove 'em over there, please. Not on the tray, or we shall have the tea spilt on them." Mr. Rice was genuinely pleased, but the languor and weariness of Friday were upon him. He could not rouse himself.

After this Eric felt his high hopes fading. These people were difficult to aid. It seemed to him now that they had all fallen into a rut, that they were contented in the rut, and not really anxious to be pulled out of it. He thought that the only chance would be to do what Rice had funked—to tackle Cyril.

Cyril gave him an opportunity. One day, arriving late, Cyril was very sulky. Asked if ill, he replied negatively. Asked if suffering from a slight ailment, such as headache or toothache, he said no. But he had been backing a series of losers, and, having made a plunge to recover the money on to-day's big race, he had just learnt that the horse was scratched.

Eric said that, although he knew his friend played cards, he was not till now aware that he backed horses, adding that surely it was a pity.

"A pity! Of course it's a pity." And Faulkner became very angry, using bad language.

Eric bore the storm with the utmost good humour, and when it blew over he tackled Faulkner on the subject of the newspaper. Surely it would be better to concentrate one's energy on the conduct of affairs here—to improve things—to lift the paper out of its rut and thereby perhaps make much money?

Faulkner, good-tempered again, laughed at him for his innocence. Then, sitting on the edge of the editorial table, and kicking its legs with his boots, he spoke of the *Mayfair Gazette* in terms of withering contempt. He told Bowen that the paper was a preposterous insult to the intelligence of the public, only the public having no intelligence did not know they were insulted. He said it was an anachronism. It was like a drunken man staggering along an empty road. "If you try to give him any assistance he will fall down, get run over, or tumble into a ditch and drown himself." You could do nothing for the cursed paper except let it stagger.

The energy of Bowen relaxed. Something that Faulkner had not said, and yet had seemed to imply, during the course of their conversation, made him think that in the other's mind the only aid that could be given to the paper had been given by Mr. Cornish, their potentate. And he surmised that Faulkner's only ambition was that Cornish might be persuaded to repeat his largesse. Bowen believed that Cornish would soon be asked to do so, if he had not been asked already. This saddened Bowen, and almost took the fire out of him.

But soon Faulkner said something that raised Bowen's spirits enormously. In fact it made him feel just at first

as if joy bells were ringing and heralds blowing trumpets and men in bright uniforms proclaiming a national holiday.

"My missus is back," said Cyril, "and she particularly wants you to dine with us on Sunday."

"It's awfully good of you both."

"No, it is she, not I," said Cyril, grinning. "You mayn't know it, but she has put you on a pedestal. It's a way she has—putting people on pedestals;" and he seemed very much amused. "I won't say how long she keeps them in their proud but uncomfortable position. Anyhow she wants to light the lamps and hang wreaths round the base of *your* column on Sunday at eight p.m., sharp."

There were other guests at this party, an elderly art critic, a young playwright, two middle-aged women; and Eric sat entranced listening to their brilliant conversation. He had no talk with his hostess. But before he left he made her and her husband promise to dine with him at a restaurant. In due course they fulfilled their promise, and after this happy evening he escorted her to the first night of a new play when Cyril was unable to go with her, and after that she took him one day to a private view of some pictures.

He settled down then into a most pleasant intimacy with the two of them. In regard to Mrs. Faulkner, as he told himself frequently, all romantic notions, all nonsense, had now been swept out of his mind. The only confidential link between them—and of this they often spoke—was the welfare of her husband. In regard to

Cyril he felt the strongest possible regard, because Cyril showed him so plainly, although in his own idiosyncratic style, that he too highly valued their companionship. He was the friend of the house, to be admitted by the maid-servant without question whenever he presented himself. Sometimes he felt almost as if he was a part of the furniture; for Cyril and Fernande on occasions behaved as if he was not there at all, exchanging endearments and caresses and having little secret jokes together. This made him hideously uncomfortable at the time, but did not interfere with his general satisfaction. He admired while tingling with embarrassment.

In the warm spring weather they went on Sunday for picnics, going out of London by train and then walking to the firs and heather of the Surrey hills. They might easily have borrowed or hired a motor car, but Mrs. Faulkner said she wanted to go "like the other cads." It would be more fun. They had two neat luncheon baskets, and when they left the train Fernande wanted to carry the baskets, but Cyril said she must not, and of course Eric carried them. A tradesman's cart presently gave the whole party a lift.

And all day long Eric was bathed in his companions' felicity as man and wife, feeling altruistic happiness, admiring them, thinking it idyllic—these two glorious clever people who were able to enjoy so simple a treat. He watched her arranging the luncheon deftly, her hat tossed away, her face shining in the sunlight. She was busy, occupied, happy, with untrammelled gestures and the graceful attitudes of youth. Indeed she looked a mere girl. It was another transfiguration.

She served her men, waited on them, stretching her shapely arm to give them more food.

"Mrs. Faulkner, do please let me."

"Cyril," she said suddenly, "he may call me Fernande, mayn't he?"

"Of course he may," said Cyril, being facetious. "I have no doubt he does behind my back already; so he may just as well do it in front of me too."

This delighted her. She laughed gaily, clenching her fist to threaten Cyril and saying it was horrible of him to make such dark insinuations.

The ground was dry, the air was deliciously warm, one could hear the song of the insects in the heather. After their luncheon Cyril and Eric sat and smoked while she packed up. Then they stretched themselves at full length and she read to them in a little volume of new poems. She read droningly so as to make them sleep.

Eric woke, rolled over on the grass. She was gone. He looked round and saw her at a little distance, her figure slim and black against the light. She stood motionless, looking at the view.

He went to her.

"Isn't it all beautiful?" she murmured, with her face tender, extraordinarily refined and spiritual in its expression; and she told him how much she always felt the beauty of nature.

Then an obscure instinct compelled him to say maladroitly that they were too kind in taking him out with them like this, but he felt that he was in the way.

"No, far from it," she said.

"Two are company—"

"No, we simply shouldn't come without you;" and she was very earnest, telling him that for Cyril the essence of the treat was having a congenial male companion. "Besides, *I* want you too."

"It's very good of you, Mrs. Faulkner."

"I shan't answer to that name."

"Fernande!"

She pointed at the wide view. "We might be thousands of miles away. Yet over there is London, and to-morrow, and the week's work, and life's ugly intricacies and complications. . . . Well, I've loved it. And I hope what you said doesn't mean that you have been bored."

"Indeed not, Fernande. I have loved it."

They had one or two more of these expeditions; and going back in the crowded train Eric was happy sitting opposite to her, looking at her, with Cyril next to her—and happier still when chance worked so that he was beside her and Cyril opposite. He knew this as a fact, but resolutely maintained to himself that it was a fact of no consequence.

In spite of all his good fortune he was not really contented. He grew restless and again felt lonely. Burning the midnight electricity in his Bloomsbury bedroom and struggling to write marketable essays and short stories, he found that his pen stuck so fast that he was compelled to abandon it and go out into the lamp-lit streets. He walked till the lamps faded, and went on walking till it was broad daylight.

What was he craving for? Not love, but encouragement, sympathy, and the highest form of spiritual inter-

course—with somebody or other. He wished to have a personal value in Mrs. Faulkner's eyes, and not to be cherished only as the useful companion of dear old Cyril. She had spoken prettily enough when she said she herself desired his society, but that was merely politeness. He wanted just a little more than that.

At last she offered it to him.

It was one evening at the Chelsea flat, when they had asked him to look in, and he had found, to his disgust, a considerable assembly of other lookers-in, amongst whom he felt utterly unnoticed and neglected. He left early, no one attempting to detain him; but Mrs. Faulkner followed him into the hall, and after closing the door behind her she reproached him for his demeanour.

"Eric, how can you be so stuffy and horrid to me? . . . You must see that with ever so many people there to look after, I couldn't be talking to you all the time."

"All the time!" he said, swelling with uncomfortable emotion. "That's rather good."

"Well, there's no sense in putting me into disgrace. I am not to blame."

"You are not to blame, Fernande. It is I who am at fault." Then he laughed ruefully. "I suppose the truth is you have spoilt me—and—and I get fretful—easily wounded—like a spoilt child. . . . Good-night."

"No, stay." She gave him a searching scrutiny, and her face had the hard look that he had learnt to dread. Then it was soft again, melting to a smile. "Eric, shall we be real friends? I am ready if you are."

The proposal was so unexpected, so transcendently satisfying, that he could not speak.

"You know what I mean," she went on, and her dark eyes glowed with kindness—"to be alone together, sometimes, and open our hearts to each other—to help each other if we can. I would like to."

He thanked her rapturously.

Next day he received a note from her. *"Dear friend,"* she wrote, *"please meet me to-morrow at Lane's Gallery of Tuscan Art in New Bond Street at four o'clock. (You see I am quick to take advantage.) Your friend, Fernande."*

This letter gave him the most intense pleasure that he had ever experienced. He read it again and again. "Your friend, Fernande!" He carried it in his pocket book, and the knowledge that it was there, his property, seemed to give him more strength, more life.

It was necessary to ask for leave to absent himself before closing time and the permission was grumpily accorded.

"But might one without indiscretion inquire why?" said Cyril. "You are evidently in a state of excitement. You have been hopping about for the last two hours like a parrot in a cage—a parrot that has eaten a bit of indigestible groundsel. What's up?"

Eric told him that he was off to see some pictures and have tea with Mrs. Faulkner.

"Oh, that's the game, is it?" And Cyril shrugged his shoulders, then laughed sardonically. "Very interesting indeed! You are highly favoured. Let me congratulate you on your promotion."

Eric had flushed, and he said something that till this

moment had not occurred to him as a thing advisable or proper to say.

"Do you mind my going about with Fernande sometimes?"

"Of course I don't," said Cyril. "Why the devil should I?" Then he laughed again. "Only I warn you, if you go on with it, you won't be able to call your soul your own in a fortnight from now. . . . All right," he said, still grinning. Then just as Bowen was going out of the room he stopped him. "By the way, that's the second warning I have given you. I shan't give you another."

A quarter of an hour later he opened his door and called for Eric Bowen.

"Shut the door," he said curtly when Eric came into the room.

This was not one of Cyril's good days. He had complained of an infernal headache in the morning, his eyes were slightly bloodshot, his tobacco-stained fingers trembled, and Eric noticed other signs suggesting that he had passed the previous night injudiciously. He stood now by the window, and when he spoke it was in his loftiest manner, yet strangely conveying, notwithstanding the almost pompous tone, a mingled idea of biliousness, insincerity, and latent irritation.

"I didn't twig what you were getting at just now. I thought you were merely blithering. But now I see. And I say Thank you for nothing;" and he pointed at Bowen with his forefinger. "Let us understand each other, if you please; and don't run away with any mistake, my young friend. Don't think that you've got to deal in me with a husband out of the last idiotic novel you've been

reading. I'm not the complaisant gentleman who shuts his eyes or dodges round the nearest corner whenever it's convenient."

Then Eric showed becoming spirit.

"Cyril," he said loudly and wrathfully, "I'll not allow you or any other man to speak to me like this." And yet beneath his feeling of indignation lay regret. He was sorry for Cyril while angry with him. "Good heavens," he went on, "it's a worse insult to your wife than it is to me. If my intentions had been dishonourable—"

"Oh, curse your intentions," said Cyril violently.

"Cyril, if you aren't careful—"

Then, next moment, Eric's righteous indignation was gone and only his sorrow remained. For Cyril went from the window to the table, and sat there holding his head between his hands and groaning.

"There," he groaned. "That's enough of it. . . . Oh, my head. It's opening and shutting. It's on fire. Get me some soda water."

There was a siphon and a glass on the window ledge, and Eric brought them to him. He drank, spluttered, groaned, and presently recovered from the temporary collapse. As he looked up at Bowen, the expression of his face was at once piteous and whimsical. Soon he was able to laugh. "What a damned row about nothing. Eric, old boy, I apologise. Wipe out anything I said that you didn't like. It's all right. Everything's all right;" and he drank some more soda water.

At this moment he had an air of forlornness that touched the heart of Eric painfully. It was truly lamentable to think of so gifted a creature abandoning himself

to downhill courses. Eric patted him on the shoulder. He had declared that no apology was needed; he implored Cyril to say no more.

But Cyril said a little more, in a manner that was entirely amicable towards the young man, and yet had beneath it the same hint of secret irritation or discomfort in regard to other matters.

"My dear boy, of course I trust you absolutely. I know you are a man of honour without your telling me so. Equally, of course, I trust Fernande. I should be a brute if I didn't, after all we have gone through together." Then the lines showed themselves about his mouth and he grinned. "But suppose you ever changed your mind —suppose, for the sake of argument, that you began to entertain different intentions, and thought it would be rather fun to make me—you know what—supply the word in French—you're so fond of quoting French phrases—"

"Cyril, if you're going to begin again—"

"No, I'm not beginning again—I'm finishing. So don't excite yourself—let me finish. I was saying"—and his face had a quite enigmatical expression,—"If you ever became the victim of passion—if you lost control of yourself and began to make love to Fernande—well, you wouldn't get very far with her. You would get about as far as a snowball in hell. . . . There, I've broken my word! I've given you a third warning. This time it's the very last."

V

"Cyril's great handicap," she said, hurrying on with her confidences, "is that he isn't straight. He *will* try to do tricky things—ingenious combinations, clever turns—and he doesn't see always, he can't see, that they're mean and shabby. That's why people don't believe in him. I told you people play him false, but he lets them down first. He has let *me* down again and again. . . . But we're not to bother about that. This is to be a holiday from Cyril. The business before the House is our Mr. Bowen—my Mr. Bowen. Much, much is to be done for him. He is to be pushed along, because he is clever as well as good." Her face was a large frank smile, and she was nodding her head as she rattled on. "He's to be a great big thumping success, and then, when he's at the top of the tree, he will be able to help his poor little friends like me. But first we must get things in order."

After seeing the pictures they had come to Claridge's Hotel for tea, and they sat in a corner of that pleasant hall till the lamps were lighted and people dining early began to pass into the restaurant. Always he would remember that first opening of the new era. In her haste to reveal herself, to be done with all ceremony and reticence, she talked with extraordinary rapidity—jumping from subject to subject—smiling, nodding her head, and sometimes touching his arm, or taking his hand

and squeezing it as if to prevent him from stopping her talk. She wasted not a moment of time in any transitional stages.

As she kept saying, they were to be pals—the most tremendous pals imaginable. In his happiness he felt as he had once felt at a juvenile party when a little girl in white muslin and a pink sash, whose acquaintance he had been ardently desiring, came across the room to him, and, without an introduction, requested him to be her partner for the rest of the evening.

"What are you staring at, Eric? Is it my hat? What's wrong with it?"

"Your hat is beautiful, Fernande, and so are you. I never saw you look so—"

She stopped him. "Now, Eric, none of that. I'm not the cut flowers and sugar plum sort of woman. No—that's horrid of me. I've loved your presents. Especially that first one—the lilies of the valley. But you must never give me any more. What I want above all is for you to tell me the truth always. You're very truthful by nature, but of course you'll be forced, as everybody else is, to lie sometimes."

"I hope not."

"Don't be silly. In a civilised community everybody has to lie—if only to avoid unkindness. Eric, will you make me the one person to whom you'll always tell the truth?"

"Yes."

"Is that a bargain?"

"Yes."

"Very well. Now you and I have got to be very sensi-

ble," and she touched his hand. "Our friendship means a lot to me."

"So it does to me."

"Yes, but in a different way. It's precious to me in ways you couldn't understand. From *my* point of view it's worth struggling for. But it might easily go down a wrong turning. . . . Already you like me a little, don't you? Remember the bargain."

"I like you a great deal."

"How much?"

"I like you. I'm always thinking about you."

"In spare moments," she said severely. "Not while you're at work?"

"No."

"That's right. When you're working, never think of anything but the work. . . . Go on." And she looked at him intently. "Analyse your feelings a little."

"I can't. I don't know what they are. I believe I'm still a little afraid of you."

"What nonsense! Why?" she asked, laughing.

"You're so experienced—you have such knowledge," and he stopped speaking. He scarcely knew what he had intended to say, but knew that it must not be said. It had seemed to him for a moment that he was for the first time clearly measuring a small, a very small, fraction, of her enormous seductive power, and the thought or recognition had frightened him. At the same moment he had felt his own innocence as something clumsy, absurd, oppressive. She was lifting the veils of her mystery, but always a deeper mystery would lie beneath the last raised veil; he was like some foolish prying peasant who has

found his way blunderingly into a temple and stands and gapes before the high priestess. "I mean that I am so ignorant," he wound up lamely, "of the world—and the ways of charming women."

"You don't know much yet, do you, Eric? But you shall be taught. Oh, yes, you'll be taught;" and she sighed. "Not by me. By other teachers, one after another. They'll all be ready to teach you."

There began for him, now, a marvellously successful year. Indeed, with Fernande to push him, his ascent towards comparative prosperity was so swift as almost to make him giddy. She allowed him no breathing spaces. She never stopped pushing.

She said that his work at the *Mayfair Gazette* was absurdly too little; and, Cyril consenting, she soon found him more to do. By her influence and introduction he was taken on the staff of *Beautiful Houses* and he worked at the office of this already famous periodical four days a week, devoting the other three days, which included Sunday, to his duties for Cyril and the old paper.

The proprietors, who owned a large group of other organs, aspired to knock out all rivals and make *Beautiful Houses* the foremost ladies' newspaper. And, firm in this resolution, they gave out to directors, managers, and everybody else, the noble watchword of "Money no object."

Its offices, ruled over chiefly by women, occupied a fine old house in Burlington Gardens, and seemed, with their big drawing-rooms, the broad panelled staircase, the con-

stant stream of well-dressed visitors, more like a ladies' club than a place of business. Altogether one might say that nothing could have afforded a more startling contrast to the poor old moribund *Mayfair Gazette*. But here, in these new and grand surroundings, Eric Bowen "made good," as Fernande joyfully described it. Known at first only as "Mr. Faulkner's friend"—since that was Fernande's invariable method of introduction for him—he soon acquired repute on his own account. The higher authorities spoke of him as "that young Bowen," and under this title he was lent in time of pressure to other papers of the group. Wherever he went he worked usefully and made a good impression.

Thus at the end of six months he had acquired a clear insight into newspaper management on a big scale; he had become acquainted with a large number of people; he was earning what seemed to him fantastically rich emoluments.

During the seventh month of his triumphant progress he saw his name twice mentioned in the public press. *"Amongst those present,"* said one of the daily papers, *"was Lord Colwyn, Lady Joyce Rennett, and Mr. Eric Bowen,"* while a Sunday paper included him in a note about the audience at the first night of a new play as *"popular and clever Mr. Eric Bowen."*

He owed this compliment, as he owed everything else, to the hidden hand of his patroness, Mrs. Faulkner. He knew now that it was she who had written all those paragraphs that cited her husband's name. More and more she disclosed her ceaseless personal activities. She had some vague interest in a milliner's business as well as in

a company for selling cigarettes; she wrote women's gossip in provincial papers; beyond keeping house for Cyril she performed unexplained and mysterious tasks for him. She advocated work, and certainly she did not shirk from working herself.

Eric Bowen could not thank her for prematurely showing him his name in print as though it had been that of a celebrated personage, and indeed begged her not to do it again; but he expressed on all occasions his ardent gratitude for the innumerable other benefits that she had showered upon him, asking her what he had done to deserve so much, how could he ever repay her, and so forth. And always she made the same sort of answers. "Don't speak of being grateful. You are giving me just what I wanted—interest, fun. You don't know what a delight it is to help anybody who has the sense to let himself be helped. Besides," she would add gaily, "you shall repay me all right, over and over again, when you are great and famous. I consider you a thoroughly sound investment, Eric."

Her husband also told him not to worry. Perhaps surprised at first, Cyril now watched or noted Bowen's successes with what seemed to be whole-hearted amusement. He chaffed him and never at any time betrayed the slightest sign of enviousness. "This is to wipe my eye," he said once in his wife's presence. "It is an object lesson, my dear Eric. You are the good boy of the storybooks, and I am the bad one."

"If it's a lesson, why don't you take it?" said Fernande in an unusually biting tone. "It's never too late to mend."

"Isn't it, old girl?" said Cyril, grinning good-humoredly. "Well, when you have quite done with him, give me another chance. . . . By the way, where are you living now, Eric? Has she moved you again? What's your present address—Park Lane?"

Very early in her campaign she had insisted upon visiting his room at the Bloomsbury lodging-house.

"Oh, my poor unhappy child, what a perfect pig-sty! I could shed buckets of tears to think of you alone here night after night;" and instead of weeping she laughed. She was seated on his narrow little bed, and she bounced herself up and down, after the manner of a child, or as if trying to break the springs. "What a *beast* of a bed. It isn't a bed—it's as hard as a prison plank."

While she was chattering and laughing there came a knock at the door, and without waiting for any answer to the knock somebody entered the room. It was the landlady, a middle-aged sour kind of woman, of whom Eric had always been shy.

"I heard the voices," she said sourly, "and I wondered whatever it could be. It's very unusual taking lady visitors up into the bedrooms. It's quite against our rules."

"Is it indeed?" said Fernande, with a malicious twinkle in her eyes. "Well, Mr. Bowen won't trouble you with any more visitors—whether male or female. He is leaving you at the end of the week. Mr. Bowen is my nephew; and, as his aunt, let me tell you that I am dissatisfied with his accommodation here. This room is disgracefully dirty, and there is a very nasty smell on the staircase and the landings. The morals of the house may

be all right, but I should think that the drains are certainly out of order."

The landlady began an angry protest, but Fernande became so haughty and stern that she overawed her. Cyril himself, and at his worst, could not have dismissed her from the room in a more devastating manner.

"There, you'll *have* to come away now, because you have forfeited your reputation," and the visitor laughed mischievously. "That old woman will go on brooding and putting two and two together, and in the end she'll decide that I'm not really your aunt at all."

Eric was promptly installed in a couple of very comfortable and yet inexpensive rooms over a china shop in Sloane Street that had been found for him by his untiring guide and guardian. "This," she said, "is much more suitable for you, and much more convenient for me. Now I can get at you when I want you." She allowed him to buy two or three pretty things from the china shop to add to the charm of the conventionally furnished rooms, but she was resolute against anything approaching extravagance. She said he must save every penny. The telephone at his bedside was a present from her.

She superintended his orders to the tailor, told him where and how to have his hair cut, and even assisted him in choosing his ties and socks.

"Yes, that will suit my brother," she said to the hosier. "My brother has been abroad. So he does not know what is being worn in London."

Outside in the street again, she slipped her hand for a moment through his arm and gave it a friendly jog.

"Eric, I think you are the greatest dear to put up with

me. You said you wanted a friend, but you'll confess I'm a very interfering one."

"You are a very inspiring one."

"That's the way to answer. I hope I am, Eric. It's what I always want to be."

Never once did he rebel or weary of her kindness or grow cold in his gratitude.

Continually she was urging him to further work. "It would be worth while," she said, "if only to keep you out of mischief; but that isn't the real reason. Now is your chance. It is now or never, because with real big success you'll have no time for anything."

She made him take lessons in dancing to improve his step, and lessons in French to eradicate the bad accent at which Cyril mocked. She made him learn all about the Stock Exchange. She made him work hard at manuals of composition, rhetoric, grammar. Beyond this she revised his taste in literature, compelling him to bid a long good-bye to the classics and learn the new authors. She gave him lists of books and names, and would not rest until he was able to speak of them glibly.

All these things filled most of his life, and the rest of it was filled with Fernande. They went about together. Whenever they had an evening free they spent it in each other's company. He was proud of her, and happy to be with her—so grand and beautifully dressed, with people bowing to her, at one of the big fashionable restaurants; or in her hat and jacket, sitting at a favourite corner table in one of the cheap Soho places, "dining like cads," as she used to say.

She talked to him on the telephone every morning, and again nearly every night, so that when for perhaps a week at a time they did not meet she nevertheless seemed to be with him.

They were friends, the closest possible friends, but not lovers. Indeed it was a friendship in some respects more strangely intimate than that which usually subsists between people who avowedly love each other. She supplied him with the attention and solicitude that a man gets from three or four women rather than one—his mother, his sisters, his wife, and the old family servants, each busy to make him happy. And perhaps above all else she was like a man friend, the good pal, the desired comrade, who never fails one, of whose society one cannot grow tired.

She would come into his rooms unexpectedly, merely to employ a few odd minutes. She pulled off her hat, threw it away from her carelessly, sat upon the arm of his chair or on a stool at his feet. One of her favourite attitudes was when she crouched down by the side of the fire. Sometimes, again, when he himself returned, she was there waiting for him. Once he found her in his bedroom, so busily occupied that she would scarcely take any notice of him. She had pulled out all his garments from the wardrobe and was inspecting them, brushing them, refolding them. He watched her, smiled at her, and noticed, as he had often noticed before, her concentrated expression. It was extraordinary, the completeness with which she could concentrate her mind on the immediate task, however small. For instance, when she was putting on her hat, or arranging her veil before going out, you might

speak to her and she did not answer, she did not hear. She did not seem to know you were there. Intently occupied with the looking-glass, twiddling the veil, getting it exactly right, she at last finished, and it was as though she had lifted a large extinguishing cap that she had put over you to get you out of her way. But in these fits of concentration, when she lost all sense of her immediate surroundings, it sometimes touched his heart to see what seemed wistfulness or sadness in her face. Once she brought one of his shirts and some socks into the sitting-room and ostentatiously mended them. She was not clever with her needle, and, absorbed in surmounting difficulties, she allowed an hour or more to pass before she would speak to him. "Fernande," he called, saying her name louder and louder. She never raised her head, never stirred, but went on laboriously stitching, and he sat watching her, admiring her, yearning over her. The parting of her hair was white and straight, with the hair drawn back to the ears in the severe style that she never changed. Her pose, her every gesture, was graceful. He felt an immense tenderness.

He knew her, then, better than many a man knows the wife with whom he has lived for a decade. He knew the aspect of her face when it was close to his, the look of her long eyelashes and of her soft eyes when they were so near as almost to touch him; he knew the feel of her hands, every sound of her voice, her little tricks and turns of expression; her way of rattling on with amazing rapidity when she had some narration to make that she thought would amuse him, her laugh of mischievous mirth, her laugh of proud contempt.

They were not lovers, and yet they often talked of love. But in this, too, he was following, not leading. She asked him questions and made him answer them.

"Have you started any guilty intrigues?" This was a joking question of hers, and she used to ask it with mock severity. "No? That's right. I should hope not."

Also she said once, looking at him meditatively, "I wonder if the best thing I could do for you wouldn't be to find you some nice rich woman and let you marry her. How would you like that, Eric?"

"Unfortunately the woman I would like is not free. She is married already, and as her husband is a great friend of mine I can't wish her to become a widow."

She laughed delightedly, but said he was very foolish.

"Poor out-at-elbows excitable old Fernande is not at all the sort of person I had in my eye. No, certainly not, Eric. I was thinking of a large-hipped, calm-tempered lady in eye-glasses—but worth ever so much more than her weight in gold."

Frequently she generalised or philosophised, speaking frankly and daringly, but never coarsely.

"Affection beats love every day and all the time. Any love between a man and a woman that is worth having and going to last resolves itself into affection. . . . That's why you and I have been so wise in getting to it at once, without all the storms and upheavals of the other thing." And she told him many times that she wished him to grasp and remember one most important fact. "Women —except a very few—care much less than men for the elemental part of love-making. Ordinary men never understand this. Nowadays they are nonplussed, abso-

lutely bewildered by running up against what seems to them a total absence of sex feeling, and they say—the silly things—that modern women are ceasing to be really women. They make a hullabaloo, saying it is an ominous sign of the times—this absence of sex excitement. But, Eric, my sweet one, it was never there—not ever—not as men supposed. Women are just the same as they have always been. Women want to hold the man they love—and if he forces them they'll do anything on earth to hold him. They'll steal, kill, betray. But it's the spiritual part of him they want—it's him himself. If they ever seem to seek the manifestations of the flesh, it's only to gain a proof—or to make themselves believe—that they are mistresses of his soul. . . . And the horrible thing is that men, after you have given them everything on the physical side, grow tired—soon or late. All that we laugh at in old books and plays is *true*." And once, while repeating this little homily, she passed with abruptness from the general aspect of things to the particular circumstances of their own case. "That's another reason why it would be fatal for you and me ever to go off the safe road. You'd be sweet—you'd swear it made no difference afterwards—but you'd never respect me—or even think of me—in the same way. Gradually I should lose all value in your eyes. Even the new feelings would become weak—everything would disappear at last. Believe me this is true. The fire burns low, then blazes up again. It does that a lot of times, Eric, and then it goes out."

This was an unusually serious turn to her discourse. For the most part she talked lightly, and often very amus-

ingly. In her own individual manner she was as good a talker as Cyril. And she made Eric talk too. She would not allow him to applaud her jokes or other good things while contributing nothing himself.

"Come back at me, Eric. Don't merely sit and beam. Conversation should be like high-class lawn tennis. You must take everything that comes over the net—and if any one sends you a stinger, return it harder than it came."

"Ah, but I am not quick, like you and Cyril. I am slow."

"No, you're naturally quite quick enough, but you have had so little practice. That's why I tell you to practice with me, when it doesn't matter. Then you'll soon improve, and be ready for more important encounters."

At the end of that first year he seemed many years older than he had been at the beginning. He felt stronger and bigger, physically and mentally. He never flushed or stammered now; his manner, as she often told him, was exactly correct; he possessed, as he was informed by the same authority, that most valuable of all qualities, modest assurance.

"And you're so *smart*. I assure you, you're getting dangerously attractive. Oh, do you in the least guess, my Eric, how much it means to me, all this—your success, your development? I simply burst with pride—and rapture—and self-glorification. . . . We might so easily have missed it. We might have failed altogether if we hadn't been able to lift ourselves above the ways of common vulgar people. You do see how wise we are, don't you? Nothing of it could have been done if we had

allowed the ordinary stupid accident to happen—if you hadn't been so dear, and if I hadn't had common sense. But we chose the better part. And we have our reward. We are given something solid, and with nobility in it, something pure and holy. Something *good*."

If this was so, it was too good to last.

VI

He continued to be happy in his work itself, but gradually, as time passed, all his other happiness diminished until it seemed that little was left. He no longer woke of a morning to an enchanted world in which glorious things would happen in response to his unspoken wish; the charm had gone from a once adored London; life, when you examined it, was full of mean compromises and sordid mysteries.

All the things that distressed Fernande were now his own personal distresses. He was so completely bound to her that what injured her could not leave him unscathed. She told him much, but kept enormously more to herself.

The idyllic character of her married life was a hollow sham, or at best a mere surface aspect. She and Cyril quarrelled frequently and violently. Cyril had what she called "bad turns," he indulged in heavy drinking fits, he spent all the money that both made. He recklessly contracted debts. Sometimes she could not even find cash to pay the tradesmen's books.

Yet, although Eric made a great effort to overcome her resistance, she would not allow him to aid her. She would not accept money—at least not from him. She became cold and hard, as if seriously offended when he pleaded with her.

Nor would she allow him to intervene with Cyril on her

behalf. Once she said that Cyril had been "brutal" to her; and Eric, indignant, chafing, at his wit's end, said he would call Cyril to order. But at this she seemed to be quite frightened.

"Oh, no. I implore you never to come between Cyril and me."

"I can't stand tamely by and see you ill-treated."

"But you must, dear. And he doesn't ill-treat me really. I have exaggerated. Our quarrels aren't anything. He and I understand each other. Promise that you won't speak to him, Eric."

These things worried him frightfully.

Yet far worse were his always increasing doubts about her herself. She was chastity personified in regard to him, but what was her rule of conduct in regard to others?

He understood now, irrevocably, irrefutably, that his old vague thoughts of her as a deeply practised siren, a sort of Cleopatra or a high priestess of love, fantastic as they might be, were nevertheless based on a correct intuition of certain facts. She exercised at will the strongest fascination over men. With an art that was too subtle for analysis, or even for detection ordinarily, she made men aware of her presence, roused their curiosity or hope, and drew them to her. She could do it anywhere, if she wished; in a crowd, in a public place, and while she went on talking to you and kept you talking, she would notice infallibly the effect that she had produced or was producing.

Once when she and Eric were dining at a restaurant a stranger scribbled a little note and sent it across the room

to her. She took it from the waiter without a word, perfectly calm, faintly smiling, and was about to read it when Eric snatched it from her hand.

"That's not worth reading," he said hotly. "It's a mistake. I'll attend to it."

He took the note back to its writer, called him "an insolent hound," and invited him, if he found the epithet unpalatable, to come outside and have his head punched. When he returned to Fernande his face was flaming, but in other respects he made a display of the stiffest and most correct self-composure.

"You are splendid, Eric. So brave. Cyril would have treated it as a joke."

"I'm afraid that some of Cyril's jokes have ceased to be jokes with me."

"Have they?" said Fernande; and she touched his hand under the table, and then looked bored. "Anyhow, thank you for being so prompt to defend me."

But he could not defend her. He ached to defend her, and might not. In that lay the torment of his anomalous position. He had no status, no rights or claims, whereby he could come boldly forward as her defender. He was ruled out of the lists as a champion, and yet could not always refrain from attempted championship.

He must speak, whether wisely or foolishly, when disparaging things were said in his presence. In the gossip of those half literary and half artistic circles that she frequented her name was connected with the names of half a dozen men. He knew this and loathed the sound of those names.

Cyril did not look after her. On the contrary, he let her do just whatever she pleased. She often went away, and during her absences—these never adequately explained absences—Eric's doubt changed to suspicion and became almost intolerable.

He suffered, he could not sleep, he did not eat properly, he grew thinner.

"Eric," she said with solicitude, "why are you like this? What's the matter?"

"Can't you guess?"

"No," she said, "I can't guess"; and she talked very fast.

She did not choose to guess, he thought; she would have no explanations. Yet sometimes she voluntarily explained, offering him unexpected confessions and looking at him solemnly while she spoke—as for instance when she confessed that she was a gambler, as bad a gambler as Cyril.

"Yes, dear. I know it's wrong, and I mean to cure myself. Cyril is cards and horses. I am stock exchange."

Was that true? One could never know if what she said was true or false. She lied abominably or splendidly, just as you cared to consider the matter. She herself said that she lied from benevolent motives. It was cruel to tell people the truth if the truth was likely to cause pain. One must be kind and spare their feelings.

Thus at an evening party she would clutch at Eric's arm and say despairingly, "There's that old fool Horace Tanner coming to ask me to one of his atrocious luncheons. I can see it in his simper, I can feel it in my bones. I would rather be dead than go."

Then Mr. Tanner, after paying a few compliments, emitted his polite invitation.

"Oh, how delightful," said Fernande, her face shining, her eyes flashing pleasure and gratitude. "A million thanks. I shall simply *love* to." Then her radiant face clouded, and she uttered a little cry of anguish. "But what day did you say? Thursday! Oh, I do think I am the most unfortunate person on this earth. Thursday's impossible"; and, saving Mr. Tanner pain, she told him how on Thursday she had to take some orphan children to the British Museum, or to go into the country to find lodgings for a friend who had just undergone a dangerous operation.

This sort of thing had amused Eric; he used to chaff her and tease her about it, imitating her intenseness and volubility, and her wealth of unneeded detail; but now its fun had gone cold, because he knew too well that on occasion she dealt with him as she did with her Tanners.

At last she told him a falsehood that wounded him sharply. They were going to the theatre together, but early in the morning he received a message saying she was ill and obliged to rest, and all that day and evening he was anxious and unhappy about her. Next day, however, she announced that she had recovered and felt well enough for the postponed treat. At the theatre she met and talked with friends, and from these people Eric learned that yesterday she had left her sick bed to attend the opening ceremonies of a new club and had danced there half the night.

"Why did you deceive me?" he said afterwards.

"Because I thought you'd fuss. Eric, I simply *had* to go to that place. I didn't enjoy it—not a tiny bit."

Alone with her in their taxi-cab, he reproached her again, and she spoke piteously.

"Oh, don't be unkind to me. Not *you,* Eric. Every man I've known has been unkind to me—except you. Oh, for God's sake, don't be like the rest"; and she burst into passionate tears.

He was overwhelmed.

"Why can't you trust me?" she sobbed out. "Why must you suspect me? Why won't you let me manage things as I please?"

Her shoulders were shaking violently; her head was down; she was laid low, as a child is, by the storm of her grief. He held her hand in both his hands and murmured reassuring words. "Fernande—dear Fernande. I didn't mean it. I have no right. Don't—don't cry." His heart melted in regret and compassion.

He determined to speak to her very seriously; and three days later, once more on his way to Chelsea, he was rehearsing the most important things that he had to say. But he never said them.

It had been arranged that he was to take her out to dinner and then to a little dance or "rag" at the studio of some young artists. When he arrived at the flat the maid-servant said Mrs. Faulkner was not ready. Mrs. Faulkner had a visitor with her in the drawing-room, and she wished Mr. Bowen to wait in the dining-room. Mr. Bowen accordingly waited there till he was joined, not by Mrs. Faulkner, but by Mr. Faulkner.

"Here's a damned nuisance," said Cyril, looking unspeakably bored. "Fernande's husband has turned up again."

"Fernande's husband?"

"Yes, we could never get rid of him—and we have him on our back like this from time to time, for a kind of family debate."

"Do you mean—" Eric saved himself from a ridiculous question by putting it into the form of a reflection. "Then you and she are not really married."

"No." Cyril shrugged his shoulders. "Confound it, no. I only wish we were. Then we shouldn't be subject to this kind of annoyance. However, I mustn't be unfair. I dare say it was as much our fault as his—in the beginning. Yes, I'm afraid F and I were to blame—by letting things slide and not looking far enough ahead, as we ought to have done."

Eric was bewildered, dazed, almost deprived of any capacity for coherent thought. But Cyril, although pitiably bored, was calm and unruffled. Then Fernande came in, not dressed for the dance, looking preoccupied and rather worried, but not in the least perturbed.

"Have you told Eric?" she asked.

"Yes," said Cyril, "I have told Eric"; and he nodded towards the other room and the unseen visitor. "Is he becoming more reasonable?"

"Yes, I think he is—a bit," said Fernande. "But I must go back to him. . . . Keep Eric. Don't let Eric go"; and she hurried away again, with the busy manner of a doctor or a nurse returning to a patient.

She reappeared after a considerable time and made an announcement.

"He won't take a penny less than twenty pounds. He

says nothing less would be any use. He sticks to the story that he is really down and out."

"Oh, very well," said Cyril, with another shrug of the shoulders. "Where's my cheque book?"

"He won't take a cheque."

But on this Cyril began to fret and fume, saying that beggars must not be choosers, that he objected to impudence, and so forth. Fernande, however, quieted him, and they both of them hunted and rummaged, now here, now there, in pocket-books and hand-bags, in the sideboard drawers, in their bedroom furniture, collecting the money. They collected sixteen pounds eleven shillings, and Eric provided the odd three pounds and nine shillings—it being clearly understood that this was to be a loan and not a gift. They went away together then, leaving the dining-room door largely ajar.

To Eric the whole of that evening was like a dream. The revelation was entirely unexpected, and yet it seemed to him as if he ought always to have expected something of the kind and that, although greatly startled, he was not really surprised.

He heard them now come out into the hall with their unwelcome visitor, who spoke to them both. It was the voice of a gentleman. After saying something about the weather and the likelihood of more rain, he bade them farewell.

"Good-bye, Fernande. . . . Good-night to you, Faulkner."

"Good-night," said Cyril, shutting the hall door upon him.

As they came to the dining-room Cyril had his arm

round her waist and in the doorway he kissed her, murmuring affectionately.

"Poor old girl—poor old girl. Dashed hard luck on you. But, from the look of him, we're near the end of it."

"Now, Eric dear," she said brightly, "a thousand apologies, and bless you for staying."

She said that after this little upset she did not feel equal to the arranged festivities, but they both begged Eric to remain for a sort of scratch meal; and the three of them had the gayest, happiest little dinner. The servant had been sent out for food, Fernande helped to lay the table, Cyril opened a difficult bottle of champagne—it was like one of their picnics on the Surrey hills. When the servant had left the room and they were "all tiled in," as Cyril said, they both told Eric a lot about the husband. They were magnanimous in tone, as when one says "Fair is fair," or "Give the devil his due." Each spoke in turn.

"Eric," she said, "it's dreadful to see a person you were once fond of fallen so low."

"Yes," said Cyril, "he has let himself run to seed, and it is pretty obvious that he can't last much longer."

"Nobody's enemy but his own," said Fernande.

"You can guess what has been his downfall," said Cyril; and he made a gesture and pantomime of raising a glass, to indicate that the man's vice was drink. He did this very solemnly, as if drinking was indeed a terrible practice, and one of which he himself was altogether guiltless.

They went on with their talk, praising now freely. That person had been a real good sort in the beginning,

a fine rider, a hard man to hounds, an all round sportsman.

Eric felt it to be very dreamlike. When he left they stood in the hall, forcing him to linger, and Cyril again had his arm round Fernande's waist, cherishing her, making much of her. The little scare or annoyance had drawn them closer together, reawakened their affections, taught them to value each other more highly—or so it seemed.

When Eric next saw her, a day or two afterwards, she spoke at once of the domestic secret.

"I am so glad you know," she said in a quietly brisk and businesslike tone. "Because, knowing, it's easier for you to grasp my point of view."

"Fernande," he said, "may I ask you one question? If, as appears possible, your husband dies some day or other, what will you do?"

"What shall I do? How do you mean?"

"I mean, will you and Cyril marry then?"

"Of course we shall." As she said this her forehead puckered in a frown. "Yes, no doubt I shall. But why do you ask?" Then she gave him the searching look that he knew so well. "Eric. It hasn't made any difference to you, has it?"

"No, none whatever."

He wished this to be true, and he tried to believe that it was.

But now something occurred to set the whole current of his thoughts in a new channel. It concerned the famous "potentate."

VII

On several occasions during the last year Eric had seen Mr. Cornish in the offices of *The Gazette*. At the sound of his approach there was always a tremor upstairs; Cyril pulling himself together, Miss Williams and Miss Shaw rushing to their typewriters, Mr. Cooke nervously adjusting his necktie at the small looking-glass above his table. One had ample warning because the potentate made a considerable noise down below and on the stairs, saying good-morning or good-afternoon to Mr. Rice and any one else that he encountered; for he seemed to be the sort of person of whom it is said that he has a kind word for everybody. He came bustling into the editorial rooms at last with a general greeting—"How's all the world to-day? Good-morning, good-morning—" and slapped down some papers on the nearest ledge or table.

He was a man of about sixty, so solidly built as to appear less than his real height; his face was broad and strong, not uncomely, with lively blue eyes beneath bushy grey eyebrows; the hair on his head was quite white, but thick and strong, and short-cut. His costume was always the same—a blue suit with a double-breasted jacket, a deep turn-down blue collar, a black and white spotted tie,—and thus invariably attired, he looked rather like a pilot or sea captain out of uniform. His reddish sunburnt complexion enhanced the seafaring air. For the rest, he

seemed to Eric an odd mixture of extreme shrewdness and extreme simplicity. In his presence one could not believe any ugly discrediting tales; his frank outlook, hearty voice, good-humoured laugh, all disarmed suspicion; and instinct and observation together had long since persuaded Eric that, in spite of his millions, the man was a kindly creature, a well-meaning good sort. Eric had no speech with him; for Cyril always took over charge, and in oblivion of his previous truculent talk and lofty contempt, showed himself polite to the verge of sycophancy. In fact it was painful to note the insincerity of Cyril during these brief interviews.

The purpose of the morning or afternoon call was always similar. After asking them how they were getting along, and adding words to the effect that he knew nothing about newspapers, and therefore did not wish to interfere, Cornish announced that he had come there for "his ladies." His daughters or their friends wanted "some stuff put in." And he handed over his documents —something about a concert for a charity; or a quite ridiculous puff concerning a singing lady who had once been the daughters' governess; perhaps also a brief note saying, *"Please praise or draw attention to Mr. So-and-So, the Wigmore Street photographer."* He slapped it all down on the table again, smiling genially, and said, "Shove that in the next number." And Cyril of course said that in it should go. After all, it was no worse than the obligatory nonsense that they had to insert about the motor car people.

Now one day in June, Cyril told Eric that Mr. Cornish required a special article. It was to be a four-thousand-

word puff about a new kind of concrete, and Eric was to write the thing.

"Yes. Concrete! Some fresh form of the dashed material that he wants to make people use, as far as I can make out, instead of everything else." And Cyril laughed contemptuously. "It can be used for building an Eiffel tower or for making a waste-paper basket. He has been jawing my head off about it. He wants us to set out its attractions in the most taking style. I wish you'd get on with it."

Provided with pictures, pamphlets, books of statistics, and so forth, Eric set to work laboriously and conscientiously, spinning the required four thousand words. Cyril looked at the article when it was finished, cut out a line here and a line there, then told Eric to take it round himself to the potentate on the following morning.

The house in Carlton House Terrace which had now been occupied for some years by Mr. Cornish was really two houses knocked into one, so that rooms opened out on both sides of the big hall and you had an immediate sensation of unusual size and space. Eric was impressed by the quiet grandeur of the house, its stone columns and high doors, its broad winged staircase of shallow marble steps and wrought metal balustrades. An elderly man in a silk hat, who looked like a cabinet minister, was coming down the stairs; two younger men with leather cases, looking like clerks, were going out together; servants in a sober livery moved here and there. The place struck him as resembling at once a private palace and a government office.

Mr. Cornish was engaged at the moment. A servant led Eric towards an empty room to the left of the hall; but before they reached it a door at the back was opened, and the servant stopped short and said that Mr. Cornish was now free.

From the room at the back a woman had emerged. Dressed in black, meagrely if not shabbily, she seemed humble and insignificant amidst such grandly dignified surroundings. Her face looked pallid, haggard, in the tempered light of the hall; her manner was dejected; she moved swiftly. It was Fernande.

At sight of Eric she stood still, and then with a slight gesture and faint smile, but no spoken word, passed rapidly out into the sunshine of the June morning.

"Mr. Bowen," said the servant, announcing him.

The door closed and he was alone with Cornish—but not the genial good-humoured Cornish to whom he had become accustomed. This one was much redder; he seemed angry and flustered; he spoke to his visitor very abruptly, if not rudely. Instead of taking the proof of the article, he walked about the room and talked in a loud angry voice.

"I don't like it. I won't have it. I shall not stand it."

Then he turned sharply from a window and addressed Bowen more directly.

"Who are you? I mean, *what* are you? How long have you been at that place? Where did Faulkner get hold of you? Never mind. It's of no consequence." He said all this with great strength and noise. But now he suddenly became quiet, and looking at Bowen with an odd

rueful sort of expression, rubbed his chin hard with his hand. "Listen to me. I have just been thoroughly upset by Faulkner's wife coming here asking me—favours. Why the devil couldn't he come and ask me man to man? I don't like it." And once more he became loud and voluble, saying in effect that he believed Faulkner to be a rotten worthless fellow. "The woman's a good sort—spoilt by him. I don't like her ways either. I think—"

Eric interrupted him firmly.

"Mr. Cornish, I am a great friend of theirs."

"Of both of them?" said Cornish, again turning his head sharply. "Or one of them?"

"Of both."

"Oh, well, you are right to stick up for your friends. I'll say no more. Perhaps I have said too much already. . . . There. Sit down."

Eric obeyed him, and an incredibly unexpected conversation ensued.

"I have no right to judge people or to be hard upon them," said Mr. Cornish. "Heaven forbid. I have had all the luck myself, and I should be an ill-conditioned curmudgeon if I didn't know—aye, if I didn't know right well—that I can afford to be generous. You may take it from me, Mr. —— What's your name again? . . . Bowen! Just so. Well now, Bowen, my dear fellow, as I was about to say—In this world, as it's now constituted, there's one word that's sufficient excuse for whatever people do—and that's *poverty*. When people are poor the little that they have is taken from them—their pride, their self-respect, their original ideas about right and wrong, everything. They can't help themselves. Little

by little they let the whole bag of tricks go from them. I am not poor, I am rich, and I try to remember it. I try to remember how easy it is to resist temptation when you aren't really tempted. There. . . . Not another word about that—about your friends."

He was smiling now; his complexion had faded down to its ordinary redness; and as he sat there talking he was good nature and geniality personified. He began to give off his philosophy of life. It was a harangue strangely different from one of Cyril's cynical discourses. His views were simple, innocent; he said things of such astounding triteness that one would have thought them unsayable; but Eric listened with an ever-increasing certainty of his essential kindness. After the manner of all self-made men he spoke soon of his early struggles and first success; and Eric felt now irrevocably convinced that he was good through and through. You could not doubt it. He was a man who had lived all his life amongst hard facts, a man who disdained traffic with shams and pretences. Eric's feeling of being now in touch with the realm of solid realities was very strong, and through his mind there swept a revulsion against the triviality and unsubstantialness of his own occupations. Beyond this he felt drawn towards Cornish; all his personal sympathies went out to him. Here would be a chieftain indeed. To serve such a man would mean doing something worth doing, real honest work. And then an absurd thought presented itself, one of those wish-thoughts that belong to childhood and that children yield to because they are not yet strong enough or logical enough to reject them on account of their wild improbability. "Oh, how I wish that before I

leave this room he would offer me employment under him in any capacity."

"Yes," Mr. Cornish was saying, "thirty-five years ago, in just such summer weather as this—unusually warm, it was—I came here to London to make my fortune unaided. And to this day I'm wondering how I did it. What were my qualifications? Devilish small, it always seems to me. I wasn't particularly clever. I don't mean to say that my head wasn't screwed on the right way; and I could work. Jupiter, I *could* work. But there it is. Luck. Sheer luck all the time. The luck ran for me and it went against others. I ask you, How many young men come here as I did then? And how many go under—or go back again with their tails between their legs? . . . Now let's have a look at this article. . . . Thank you."

He took it, but still did not read it. Instead of doing so he questioned Eric about himself in a very kindly way, and presently seeming to take great interest, made Eric tell him his whole story. "Jupiter, that's odd," he said gaily. He seemed enormously struck by the fact that Bowen was in exactly the position that he had just been describing. Bowen also had come to London full of ambition to make a career. Bowen was the very age of himself thirty-five years ago. Not quite twenty-six! "Upon my word, that puts the coping stone on the coincidence. Ha-ha," and he laughed and gave Bowen a tap with his hand. "You are neither more nor less than my prototype. My very prototype!"

Then he began to read the proof, and he paused to ask if Eric had written the whole of it. Eric said yes, except for certain small alterations made by Faulkner.

"That's like him," said Cornish, "to save himself trouble. Idle dog. But no matter." He read a little more, then raised his eyes and spoke abruptly. "What the dickens made you want to be an author?" And soon he spoke again, laying down the proof. "This isn't good, you know. It's very bad."

Crestfallen, mortified, with his blushes and his stammer returning to him after a year's absence, Eric expressed his regret at having failed.

"Naturally, I know nothing about literature," said Cornish, very serious and very trite, "but I reverence it all the same. In my opinion literature is one of the most important signs of cultivation in the individual and in the state too. A country that cares nothing for books is a country making no intellectual progress." And he narrated how he had tried to improve himself, but the handicap of an imperfect education had necessarily stood in his way. Fortunately, however, as he assured Bowen, he was aware of his limitations; he had read as much as he possibly could, and always of the best authors. "And I think you may take it from me that this stuff of yours doesn't show much promise. My dear boy, it isn't good—" And he said it again, with heightened emphasis. "It's not good, it's bad." Then he said quite cheerily that, after all, authorship wasn't everything. Important as it might be, there were many more important things. And after that he tore the proof in half and threw the pieces into an immense waste-paper basket. "Tell Faulkner it doesn't matter and he needn't worry. I'll get the thing done somehow and I'll shove it in somewhere else. . . . Good-morning to you, Bowen."

Eric Bowen went to the door and opened it, feeling such a dead weight of disappointment as he had never had to carry; feeling shame too, distress, disillusionment, together with a horrible conviction that the criticism of his literary effort was entirely justified. Then from the very threshold he was called back.

"Stop. Wait a minute. Look here, Bowen. How would you like to chuck your authorship for good and all and join forces with me?"

"I don't think there's anything in the world that I should like quite so much."

"Oh, is that so? Well, we'll think about it," and Cornish rubbed his chin and stared at Eric. "I believe I could make you useful in half a dozen different ways."

Then he said something that altogether shattered Cyril's external composure.

"I'm never one to beat about the bush. I feel as if I could like you and trust you. I seem to have taken a fancy to you, Bowen"; and he held up his hand to stop Eric from speaking. "I should want references. I should have to make sure that you are what you say you are. Tell me, could you cut yourself free from your entanglements?" As he said this there was a shrewd, an almost roguish, twinkle in his eye. "I mean your business entanglements."

"I think Faulkner would let me go."

"Of course Faulkner would," said Cornish, with a sudden tone of stern authority. "Faulkner will do what I tell him to do. But your frocks and frills—the other job —what's its name?"

Eric said that *Beautiful Houses* would undoubtedly release him.

"All right. Good-morning."

But once more Cornish stopped him. "Mind you, I can't afford to let the *Mayfair Gazette* come to grief. Did you ever hear that I am supporting it from sentimental reasons?"

Eric said yes he had heard so, and did not add that he had heard also how nobody believed it.

Now he learned that it was true. Cornish explained with much enjoyment that he kept the *Mayfair Gazette* going in order to give pleasure to his old mother. Old Mrs. Cornish, it appeared, was a country woman, hating London and declining to take any part in her son's splendours, but she liked to read the fashionable news in the newspaper. In her youth the *Gazette* had seemed the right paper to read, and she had read it ever since; it gave her a weekly treat; she would have felt at a loss if deprived of her long continued amusement. So her affectionate son had seen to it that there should be no break in continuity. The few thousands a year that this solicitude cost him were not worth considering.

Speaking of his mother, Cornish became soft and gentle, and once the eyelids blinked over his blue eyes.

"We can't do too much for our mothers, Bowen. . . . The greatest love in a man's life. That's nature's law and there's no dodging away from it. You haven't got one —poor lad." And he clapped him on the shoulder. "I think you and I will get on. You're just the sort of fellow I've been looking for. . . . Yes, I shall call you my prototype. . . . Good-morning."

During many days Eric lived in a whirl of the most pleasurable excitement and anticipation. He was winding up his affairs at *Beautiful Houses;* he was putting things in order at the *Gazette;* soon he would be receiving a princely salary and working under the great and all-powerful chieftain. For Cornish speedily declared himself satisfied with the result of those inquiries and enrolled the young man as aide-de-camp or junior staff officer at headquarters.

With evening hours as well as daylight hours entirely occupied, Eric had no spare time in which to see Fernande; but they talked to each other often by means of the bedside telephone.

She was enraptured on hearing of his high hopes. Her voice rang loud and clear; he could hear her snapping her fingers. "Eric, how divine! Tell me. He saw at once how clever you are."

Then Eric narrated his discomfiture.

"He said I couldn't write—that my stuff didn't even show promise—and I should do no real good as an author."

There was silence.

"Fernande, are you there? . . . Mr. Cornish said I had no talent for writing."

"It's true, Eric." And the voice was small and timid. "I'm glad he told you that. I have wanted to for some time, but didn't dare. Cyril thought just the same from the first."

"Then why did you let me go on?"

"It didn't matter—not in journalism. And I felt sure

you'd pull yourself into something big—just as you're going to do now. Go on and prosper. Bless you."

Her joy knew no bounds when, late one night, he finally told her of his engagement. The telephone seemed to crackle and laugh of itself while she chattered delightedly. His heart was touched as he recognised how unselfish she was in her gratification. "Now you'll be frightfully busy, and I shan't expect to see you for ages. Don't trouble about me. Dismiss me from your mind. . . . Oh, Eric, I am so happy, so immensely proud and happy. Your fortune's made. You're safe." And once more she blessed him.

There was coldness in his farewell at *Beautiful Houses*, and his exit from the *Gazette* was uncomfortable.

They did not like Cornish in Burlington Gardens, and they seemed to think that Eric was deserting them for a hostile camp. Miss Barrett, the editor, said this explicitly.

"Good-bye, Mr. Bowen," she said, offering him a limp hand. "And congratulations—oh, yes, certainly. But of course you know that you are going over to the enemy."

Eric said he did not know this.

"Oh, surely," said grey-haired Miss Barrett, raising her eyebrows. "You must have heard of the feud. Our people declined to bow down and worship at the shrine of Mr. Cornish. At any rate he's the avowed foe of all our group."

At the dusty old offices in Covent Garden, Eric felt with a pang that they would now grow dustier and dustier. There would be no one to stimulate the charwoman, or to

make any struggle against the all-pervading grime. Mr. Rice, who was looking at him so sorrowfully, would lose heart, and let everything drift, feebly consoling himself at all hours with tea and kippers and Mrs. Andrews. The paper would stagger like a drunken man. Then he felt the warmth of reassurance—it would go on staggering, on and on. Mr. Cornish would never let it fall into the ditch—at least not during the lifetime of that old lady in the country, who looked to her weekly treat.

"Ta-ta," said Cyril. "I shall miss you here—not that you care whether I do or not."

"Of course I care," said Eric.

"That's very condescending on your part then," and Cyril gave an unmirthful laugh and retired into his own den. He wore an air of gloom, and seemed quite fabulously untidy as to hair and garments. Plainly he had tried to be cordial, but had failed.

Then Miss Shaw, the younger typist, drew Eric aside. "I beg pardon, sir"—they all called him "sir" nowadays —"but would you mind saying good-bye to Miss Williams in the other room? I think she expects it."

Big, broad-shouldered Miss Williams was standing by her typewriting machine and holding an unopened packet of letter paper against her bosom. Her plump cheeks seemed made of coloured stone, but her large eyes had a contrasted softness, a swimminess, a brimming over appearance.

"Good-bye, sir," she said unsteadily. "B'lieve me, we all wish you weren't leaving us. But we feel you've stayed longer than could be hoped."

"Good-bye," said Eric. "And thank you for all your

kindness. Aren't you going to shake hands with me?"

"Yes, if you wish it, sir," and Miss Williams put down the notepaper in order to release her right hand. "Goo-goo-bye," and she made some funny sounds in her throat. "No one like you—not that we can like—isn't likely to come in your place."

Miss Shaw, the younger typist, was pulling at his coat-sleeve. "You'd better go now," whispered Miss Shaw, "or she'll break down."

Then as Miss Shaw led him out, she said in a matter-of-fact tone, "There's no sense in letting people make fools of themselves, and I'm sure you didn't desire it any more than I did."

Cornish was a widower with one son and three daughters, of whom two were married. These two ladies and their husbands and children apparently spent a not inconsiderable part of their lives with the head of the family, who indeed seemed to keep an almost patriarchal establishment in Carlton House Terrace. Friends as well as relatives found shelter there. People came into it for meals as if to an hotel; other people borrowed its rooms for charitable meetings and concerts; still more people aided the owner in giving what were technically described as private parties. But for a long while Eric Bowen had only transient glimpses of this social side of its life. He had come there to assist in its business, not its pleasures.

As he learned at once, Cornish was supposed to have retired from active labours; but notwithstanding this legend he seemed as fully occupied as he had ever been.

He still held a controlling interest in many of his old enterprises. He had contracts for all sorts of engineering works; he was building a dam in Egypt, a railway in India, some docks at Rangoon; he owned a line of ships trading in the China Seas; he was in alliance with a continental firm of banker-financiers—not to mention the making of concrete, a substance that cropped up sooner or later in all his adventures. Eric immersed himself in the study of these affairs, determining to master their intricacies as soon as might be humanly possible.

The room where he worked was at the back of the house, and the massive table at which he sat was close in front of one of the tall windows, through which he had a pleasant view of power and grandeur as symbolised for him by the Admiralty buildings, the Horse Guards Parade, Downing Street, the India Office, the two great towers of Westminster. Every building had its innumerable traditions of England and Empire. Other workers came in and out of the room, all of them substantial, mentally active people, with no time to spare for dawdling or chatter. And Eric thought, "Yes, they are dealing with realities, not futilities."

As he sat there week after week he had a sensation that every day he was growing bigger and stronger. All his ideas seemed to have enlarged; his knowledge of the world solidified; his whole grip of life tightened; and he thought, "It is because at last I can expend my energy on things that matter. I, too, am face to face with realities."

And the biggest reality of all was Cornish. When Cornish came bustling into the room he was as real as a

phenomenon of nature itself. He was like the sea, with his sunburnt face and pilot's clothes, or at least like a top-sail breeze blowing everything before it. His energy renewed the energy of others. His confidence made every one confident.

"How goes it?" he used to say, just as he did at the *Gazette* office. "Hullo, Bowen! Getting along all right? Don't swot too much. That's what we called it at school, swotting"; and he laughed. "Remember, you're young. No hurry. Plenty of time ahead of you."

Sometimes the chieftain whisked him away from his task.

"Bowen, I want you. I'm running down to the Medway to go over the new works. Put on your hat. My car's at the door."

Eric loved these sudden unexpected flights from London. Twice they literally flew away, going by air to Paris, and another time to Berlin, on each occasion starting at less than an hour's notice. That the potentate showed a marked preference for the newcomer's society was obvious to all the old members of his staff; but none of them seemed to mind.

In gratitude for so much favour Eric undoubtedly swotted with desperate conscientiousness.

July and August passed, and he refused to take any holiday. September was nearly over, and still he sat enthroned at his table. The house had become nearly empty and almost silent. Cornish was in Scotland, his family were scattered, and Eric felt tired, but very proud. He was practically in charge, the watch-dog, the humble yet trusted guardian of immensely important interests.

Now for the first time, with leisure hours at his disposal, he began to crave for the old well-tried companionship. He longed for Fernande as the one person who would be interested in every item of his recent experiences. It would be delightful to tell her everything and hear all her comments and reflections while she listened; and meditating in this manner, he felt with great compunction how completely he had neglected her, how extraordinarily little he had thought about her during the last months. As he knew, she and Cyril had returned to London. He had made up his mind to seek her company soon again when she herself wrote to him. She sent her letter late one afternoon by special messenger.

"*I want you,*" she said, "*to give me dinner and then take me to the party at the International Conversation Club. Tell me where to meet you. Please, please, please do this for your poor old Fernande.*"

VIII

The place seemed very full, but it was the Carlton Hotel of September, not of May or June; with its autumn crowd of people from provincial towns combining business and pleasure, continental tourists spending a night or two here before the last stage of their homeward journey, a few foreigners, and of course many Americans. Among the palms and little tables of the hall one caught all accents and all intonations. Mothers were marshalling their large family groups on the steps that led to the dining-room; hosts raised their voices to welcome belated guests, or leaned over the gilt balustrade of a side gallery to make excited beckonings to them; exuberant comrades called too loudly for cocktails to distant waiters; while here and there quiet discreet young men, Londoners like Eric, stood or sat alone, suffering the enervation of delay as they glanced alternately at the doors of the lobby and the clock by the wall, until each in turn felt the same swift relaxing of nervous tension, sprang into activity, and moved forward to meet the brightly coloured exiguous frock that was approaching him.

Eric's eyes were on the clock when at last his turn came, and as he directed them again to the doorway his heart leapt within him. His friend had drawn near; she was close beside him.

"How sweet of you. Am I very late?"

"Not a bit."

There was nobody like her; not anybody could ever be like this friend of his. He had seen her insignificant, almost shabby, three months ago; and now she was splendid, as in his earliest memories of her, gorgeously attired, the dark hair rigidly correct about her white smooth brow, her head borne high, her whole face shining at him, and her sweet adorable smile melting him in a warmth of responsive affection. Yet at the first touch of her hand, at the first sound of her voice, he knew that she was in an emotional state different from any that he had hitherto recognized. Directly she ceased to smile she had the wistful expression that always affected him; but he knew now that she was more than vaguely sad, she was in some real trouble of mind.

He led her to the table he had engaged at the far end of the big room and they began their dinner. She asked him no questions about his new life. All the narration that he had expected to pour out for her interested comments must stand over to some other occasion. They were to talk of her, not of him, to-night.

"What is it, Fernande?" he said, after a little while. "Tell me, won't you?"

"Oh, my dear, it's the same old story"; and she shrugged her bare shoulders and tried to laugh. "Life is too abominably complicated—and we should all be so much happier if it was simple and easy."

"Yes, but that isn't what's troubling you. You are used to all that. What is it that has upset you?"

"It's Cyril," she said forcibly. "Oh, he *has* been so hateful to me." Then her voice became piteous. "He began at Trouville—making rows and fusses. He fol-

lowed me there. I told him not to come. I didn't want him there. He was in my way. And he has gone on at me ever since. To-day we quarrelled—badly—worse than we have ever done. Eric, comfort me if you can."

She put out her hand towards him, and Eric held it for a moment or so, pressing it hard, as one does when one hopes to give another person courage or strength to bear affliction. He saw her lips trembling, and he thought she was going to cry. But she did not do so.

"This time," she said, again with force, "I don't feel like making it up. No, I doubt if I shall ever speak to him again."

"Do you mean you'll leave him?"

"Oh, I don't know. After all I'm free. Why should I let him bully me and torment me?" And she had an outburst that was almost violent in its intensity.

This seemed to give her relief.

Presently she consented to eat her food and drink her wine. Then she smiled, nodded her head, and except for an inward excitement, perceptible although controlled, was more like her old self. For a time it was as if the distress had gone out of her into her companion. Eric's emotion was difficult to stifle; he felt torn to pieces by sympathy, indignation, and sheer yearning fondness. Nevertheless a sense of paramount duty overcame instinctive reluctances and compelled him, not to defend Cyril, but at least to plead extenuating circumstances on his behalf.

"Dear Eric, you're so good to me—always so good."

She listened now meekly, even agreeing with some of the things he said.

"Fernande, I am sure it's right to make allowances for Cyril's queer temper and his cynical way of talking."

"Cynical! He can keep his cynicism for other people."

"He doesn't mean to be unkind. When he wounds you, you should try to remember—"

"Remember what?"

"Well, that, no matter what he says, he really and truly loves you."

"Yes," she said, "I believe he does—in his selfish beastly way"; and she was bitter again. "At any rate he knows that he couldn't get on without me. . . . Oh, I can tell you, I have frightened him to-day. He is ready to crawl on all fours to be forgiven."

"Then I think you'll have to forgive him."

"We'll see. I shan't be in any hurry."

Eric had chosen the Carlton Hotel as the place for dinner because of its nearness to the picture gallery at which the International Conversation Club were holding their reunion.

It was late before she spoke of going on to it, and he suggested that she might wisely renounce this entertainment altogether. But she said she felt obliged to go there.

"Why? You'll be bored stiff. It will be a horrible mob. Fernande, I wish you wouldn't. You are tired and overwrought. You had ever so much better let me take you home and sit with you quietly at the flat."

"No," she said, with unexpected firmness, "we must carry out the programme. And in any case I can't have you coming to the flat to-night."

"Nonsense. Of course I shall see you home."

"Then we part on the doorstep."

"But why?"

"For good and sufficient reasons. . . . There. Get up." She herself had risen, and as she stood looking down at him she began to laugh. She went on laughing. "Come along."

As they passed down the steps and through the now deserted "palm lounge" she talked volubly and gaily. Then in the outer hall her air seemed to become of a sudden reckless, defiant. She looked round at him, putting her hand on his arm and detaining him just when he thought they were to separate in order to let her get her cloak.

"I want to show you something, Eric"; and again she laughed. "See for yourself." She had taken him a few paces and they stood side by side in front of a large mirror. "See those two people! They seem made for each other, don't they? A dashed good-looking couple *I* call them. No, the man's perfect; but I wouldn't trust the woman, Eric, if I were you. There's a touch of the devil in her. Beware." Then moving away, she glanced back at him with a look that he had never seen in her face till now.

"Fernande," he murmured.

But she had gone. She had swept into the ladies' room without looking round a second time.

She kept him waiting, and when she reappeared she was white-faced, grave, dignified, more splendid still in her purple cloak, looking like a queen.

He told her so.

"A queen of misfortunes," she said quietly. "A queen

of hard knocks. . . . We'll walk, of course. Yes, I want to. It's only round the corner."

As soon as they had pushed through the swing doors and were in the open air she slid her hand beneath his arm and kept it there. The night was warm and fine. In the side street beyond the Haymarket two streams of coming and going vehicles stopped them; they stood among other people in evening dress, and made their way slowly towards the awning at the gallery doors. He felt her hand quivering on his arm; she seemed now to vibrate with excitement, as if she had been a child going to a grand treat, and she laughed or whispered continuously.

"Are you ashamed of me? I won't disgrace you. I'm not mad. But I think I'm wild with happiness at being with you, dear—after such a fearful long time. To have you for an hour or two! . . . Oh . . . Yes, I am tired —only a little. . . . Suppose I dropped down in a fainting fit. What would you do? Would you carry me to the nearest chemist's shop and stretch me out on the floor? Could you carry me, Eric? Are you strong enough? I would like to be carried right away from everybody—by you."

It was what he wanted to do. He wanted to snatch her up and bear her right away, to solitude and silence, to some hidden spot of this earth, island, forest, or hill, where he would guard her and protect her from molestation, where they could forever enjoy an uninterrupted, undisputed companionship. The fantastic thought that her words had aroused made him breathe fast and set his heart drumming.

Three minutes later he had lost her in the crowd of the picture galleries, and thence onwards for interminable hours he saw her only at intervals and exchanged but a very few words with her.

The party had been arranged in honour of some distinguished American lawyers, and, as he had predicted, it was a dull and wearisome business. The rooms were ill-ventilated, oppressively hot; one noticed a few stars and ribbons of solemn politicians clustered about the guests of honour; disconsolate chargés d'affaires from the embassies were bowing politely; and many dozens of perspiring nonentities struggled hither and thither aimlessly. From time to time music could be heard through the roar of mingled voices. A more densely packed mob that was like an unceasing football scrimmage along the length of one wall indicated the position of the buffets whereon were being served the light, the extremely light, refreshments.

Eric met some, and Fernande many, acquaintances. In glimpses he saw her talking excitedly, smiling, nodding, moving restlessly about the rooms with her admirers.

Little by little the party grew thin. The stars and ribbons had gone home; one after another the guests of honour offered thanks and departed; and all at once Eric saw Cyril. He was quite near, in a group of men by the devastated buffet. He waved his hand and grinned, but did not move.

Then, as if purposely, Fernande came towards them and passed close by, and Eric saw that Cyril thought she was going to speak to him. He pulled himself together, took a step forward with a smile, his aspect and manner

suggesting at once diffidence, contrition, and bold denial of wrong-doing. Evidently he had come here with a strong wish to patch up the quarrel. But Fernande neither spoke to him nor looked at him. Except for the hardness of her face he could not have known that she was aware of his presence. She went on to the end of the room and absorbed herself with other people. Next minute Cyril was gone. Eric saw him strolling off towards the staircase. He did not come back again.

At last Fernande herself consented to go. Again and again Eric had asked her to come away, and now, with only about thirty people left in the rooms, she owned that there was no sense in staying any longer.

They were silent, both of them, as their cab rattled westward through the empty streets. Then she again said she was tired, and she kept on saying it. "Yes, you're right, Eric. I'm tired—tired of everything—except you. . . . But you oughtn't to have come back with me. I told you so. I should have been quite safe alone. Safer perhaps. Never mind. . . . Comfort me a little."

"Fernande." He murmured her name, repeating it. "Fernande." He could not trust himself to utter any other word.

Then she said suddenly, "Feel my hand." And he did so. "Is it hot?"

"Why, it's burning—as though you were in a fever."

After a minute she was shivering. Her whole body shook.

"Feel my hand again. . . . Well?"

"Fernande, it's like ice"; and he began to rub it.

She drew it away and laughed. "You needn't trouble

It'll be warm again of its own accord directly. I'm like this sometimes. Everything seems to go out of me. I feel done—just done; and the circulation begins to play tricks. It's the nature of the animal. . . . No. Other women are like it too—and then the danger is that one takes to drugs, or does other foolish things. That's how accidents happen."

When the taxi-cab stopped and they had both got out she asked him if he intended to say good-night or to come upstairs for a few minutes. He said he would go up with her.

"Very well," she said calmly. "Then pay the cab and let it go."

She led him up the first flight of the stone stairs and after that they walked side by side, with pauses, as if to take breath, during which they stood still, looking at each other. At every landing she switched on the light above them and switched it off below them; and in the light he saw how dreadfully white she was and how strangely beautiful. In the semi-darkness she was ghostly, unreal, incredible. Except when she stopped she did not look at him, so that he saw only her profile, lovely as chiselled marble, sweet as a white flower. She spoke when she stopped on the second landing, and her smile while she stood motionless was enigmatical, secret, and a little sad.

"There, Eric, that's enough. Yes, that's far enough. Don't come any farther."

"No," he said breathlessly, as if to himself rather than to her, "I must go on now"; and he took her hand and they mounted the next flight with their bodies touching.

She took her hand away to use the latch-key. It was

dark in the hall. She went through the darkness into the sitting-room, he following her and closing the door behind them at the same moment that she turned on the lights. Immediately she came to him and stood close in front of him.

"Take off my cloak."

He unfastened the clasp at her throat, opened the beautiful costly garment and was about to carry it to a chair, but she pulled at it with her hands. "No, drop it. Let it go"; and it fell to the ground by their feet.

She seemed to sway, her head drooping so that he saw the back of her neck and her shoulders, and as if to support herself she put an arm round his neck. Next moment she raised herself and slowly put her face against his. Then the other arm came round him and he saw her face. She was leaning right back now, and she closed her eyes and remained motionless. Silently he bent his head and kissed her; and at the touch of her lips she gave him the grip of love that he had never felt in his whole life till now, holding him to her with all her strength, setting him on fire from head to feet, filling him with an excitement that was as delicious as repose, a joy that was like relief after long continued pain. Yet, even in the moment of his supreme delight, he was conscious of a thought that had something like dread in it, an awe such as innocence and ignorance feel invincibly at the unfolding of knowledge and mysteriousness, a faint shrinking from this final revelation of her power over him.

She had withdrawn her lips, and she murmured as if in sleep. "Darling boy. Darling boy."

Then she led him to the sofa, and they sat there, folded in each other's arms. "Don't be afraid of me, Eric." She had read his thoughts. "Yes, I know now what you meant when you used to say you were a little afraid of me. You needn't be. I'm not wicked. I'm nice really—nice to you anyhow. . . . This is all I want."

She nestled herself against him, and she seemed now childlike, weak, small, as indeed most women are in their moments of complete abandonment, when the outward trappings of manner and convention have been stripped away and they show themselves reduced to the lesser dimensions of elemental personality. Her voice was small like herself, a mere whisper.

"All I want, darling. Just to pretend that we are everything to each other."

"We are," he said, kissing her.

"No, nothing. But I want to be comforted. I want to pretend just for a minute or two that I belong to you—instead of—instead of to anybody else. Oh," and she sighed. "This is all I want. Nunc dimittis. Now let thy servant depart in peace."

They remained in this gentle embrace.

Then there were sounds at the outer door, and Eric started up.

"That's Cyril, isn't it?"

"Yes, and about time," she said, smiling.

Cyril came in, with a sprightly voice and a hang-dog air.

"Hullo! You two making a night of it? What?"

But again Fernande would not speak to him. She picked up the cloak and went out of the room, her head high, her face as hard as stone.

Cyril turned his back and stood by a small table on which were decanters and glasses.

"Have a drink," he said over his shoulder, and the glass tinkled as though his hand was tremulous and clumsy. "I was glad to find you here, Eric. You see the state of affairs—and I dare say you have put in a good word for me. She's damnably riled of course. But she'll get over it. Don't go. Stop with me a bit."

The two men sat talking for more than an hour, but nothing further was said concerning Fernande.

IX

FERNANDE, as Eric told himself, was his to do what he pleased with; she had put her existence in his hands; she loved him, not with cool, kind, sisterly regard, but with ardent over-powering love, the love that ceases to measure costs and consequences. Well, he would not fail her. He felt self-glory and remorse. He had the mingled sensations of a triumph and a disaster. The greatest thing in the world had been given to him, and it was going to take away from him everything else of value, his hopes of material advancement, his career, his whole future; for he saw quite clearly that he must at once lose his employment with Cornish.

Eric felt immense regret, but no mean shrinking from the inevitable. Nothing could have any weight with him except Fernande. Henceforth his life-task *was* Fernande.

Early in the morning she had spoken to him on the telephone, telling him to go to her at noon, and now he was on his way to her.

The momentousness of the day's coming decision gave a solemn air to the streets and houses; it seemed as if no ordinary business was being conducted; the traffic moved heavily and slowly; Sloane Square had the aspect of a place in which people are waiting for some grave pageant or ceremonial procession. Passing through it

himself, he was thinking of Cyril. Cyril had trusted him. Cyril trusted him even now.

And grotesquely, yet very painfully, there echoed in these distressing thoughts the coarse words uttered by Cyril at the opening of the intrigue. As they sounded again to his mental ear he seemed to see Cyril visibly before him, pointing at him with a yellow, tobacco-stained finger, warning him so grossly. "If you ever made love to her, you wouldn't get far. You'd get about as far as a snowball in hell."

Alas, that prophecy had gone down badly.

Poor Cyril. Eric had a wry smile.

Stirred now by the strength of the desire she had awakened in him and looking back at the past, he seemed to see that all these eighteen months had been but a slow unceasing preparation for the catastrophe. He and Fernande had been like two semi-detached houses standing side by side, built both of them of combustible materials, with woodwork turning to tinder in the sunshine until a spark falls, a wind blows, and at the same moment they both burst into flame and are devoured together. He asked himself if either had really guessed the danger. Yes, he had—but not Fernande. That is, not till last night, when it was too late and nothing could avert the conflagration.

He did not for a moment realise how entirely he had been controlled by Fernande from the beginning to the end; nor did he remotely guess that she was still to go on controlling him.

"Well, Eric?"

She was writing letters at Cyril's desk, and she did not rise to welcome him until the maid-servant had re-closed the door.

He was going to kiss her, but she stopped him.

"No, dear. I ask you not to. You and I must talk business—quietly and sensibly."

She was shabbily dressed again, her hair loose, her face unpowdered; but he understood that it no longer mattered how she looked. Her changes and transfigurations might affect other people, but not him. He would see in her now always the woman he desired, the woman without whom he could scarcely continue to breathe and exist.

"Eric, how shaken you seem. Didn't you sleep well last night?"

"I didn't sleep at all."

"No more did I," and she smiled. "We can't be surprised at that. Insomnia is the recognised punishment of grown-up people who behave like naughty foolish children. And we were very naughty and foolish. At least *I* was. But you understand of course that it can't go on."

"I understand that I can't go on deceiving Cyril."

"You have not deceived him, and you are not going to deceive him. Don't worry about Cyril—except in so far as he concerns *us*. Now listen"; and she talked to him in a tone that was certainly very businesslike, telling him that they must disregard the mutual manifestations of yesterday, indeed forget them altogether, and get back immediately to their old safe and comfortable intercourse. "You see, dear, we have no choice in the matter. I put it to you, what else can we do?"

"You can come away with me."

"Suppose I said yes, then one of two things would happen. Either we should get tired of each other in a fortnight or we shouldn't want to part again after the fortnight."

"I didn't mean us to part. I wasn't thinking of a fortnight. I was thinking of forever."

"That's out of the question," she said firmly. "A nice incubus I should be to you, my poor Eric. Besides, in no circumstances could I consent to leave Cyril."

"But last night you talked as if you had almost made up your mind to do it."

"Oh, no. You are quite mistaken"; and she spoke rapidly. "Of course I never said anything of the sort. And I have told you—anyhow you aren't to remember the rubbish I said. I don't think I know what I did say."

She was sitting on the sofa and she had made him sit on a chair opposite to her. Now he got up and went to the window, and stood there looking down through a long side street at a narrow glimpse of the river, with barges towed in midstream, and on its farther shore the white stone embankment and yellowing foliage of Battersea Park. And he thought that he had never seen this view; for often as he had been in the room he had not once visited it by daylight. It was one of those insanely trivial thoughts that obtrude themselves in the midst of the sharpest pain and the strongest emotion. He felt wounded to death, angry, miserable.

"Mistaken, was I?" he said bitterly, not turning, with his eyes still on the river. "Mistaken all along? Very stupid of me. I suppose it amounts to this. On reflec-

tion you don't care for me. You've never been really fond of me."

"That's not true," and in her voice there was a little break and the deepening note that stirred him to his depths. "Haven't I shown you? Haven't I proved it? I am very fond of you—infinitely, disastrously more than you would believe if I told you. That's the real trouble."

"Fernande, I do believe—I want to believe," and he came to her from the window. "Say you are acting now. Say this is the pretence—not the other. Fernande, darling, you were mine then."

"No, Eric, I wasn't yours. I can't be yours—not in the way you mean."

"You were. I felt it; I knew it. And you shan't—I won't let you change your mind and take yourself from me."

He had caught hold of her, and he tried again to kiss her.

"No," she said. "Eric, I have asked you not to," and she resisted him forcibly. "Oh, very well"; and with a shrug of the shoulders she ceased all opposition. "Kiss me then." Holding her in his arms, he kissed her. She was neither limp nor rigid, firmly passive, her face cool and without a tremor beneath his searching lips. "You can go on kissing me as long as it amuses you. But there's not much to it, is there? . . . What, tired already? You can't find the lady who hugged you last night, can you? Now don't be angry. She has gone. She has given up her tenancy of the flat. You'll never find her here again."

He had released her, and he walked about the room,

staring at its familiar objects and hating them all as the inanimate witnesses of his shame and distress.

"Fernande, you are cruel to me."

"Am I? Why? It's for your sake every bit as much as for mine. And remember, I told you from the beginning that I valued our friendship above everything. Please, please don't let us spoil it."

"You know as well as I do that what has happened makes it impossible."

"I don't, I don't," she said eagerly. "Eric, we can save it still. It's worth struggling for."

"I shan't struggle. You haven't played fair. You have simply cheated me."

"Eric!"

But he could not check himself now. His pride was lacerated, jealousy possessed him, and he said unpardonable things to her. He was unable to refrain, yet knowing that if he hurt her he was hurting himself more frightfully, knowing too that with every hard word he was increasing her power over him, inflaming his wounds, rubbing poison into them.

"You speak of Cyril. But you are not faithful to him. Give me a truthful answer for once."

"Yes, I am—in essentials."

"What does that mean? You must be faithful or not. You must be one thing or the other."

"I am as faithful as Cyril wants me to be."

His jealousy stung him, and he went on more outrageously.

"Eric, stop."

But he could not stop. He burst into a bitter tirade

against her. The words came, senseless words, and it was as if he merely repeated them without further thought, and yet he suffered more at every word. Even while he gave way to it, his violence seemed to him his crowning humiliation.

She watched him, trembling, moving her hands, uttering little cries. Then with a louder and more piteous cry she sprang up and answered him with passionate strength.

"Who is unfair now? Eric, you're worse than unfair. You're ungenerous—you're mean. . . . Oh, how dare you? How dare you?" And she too became violent. "Think what you like. Suppose it's true—all you've said. I'm not responsible to you—or any other man. Damn you all—since you've gone over to their side. You're all the same—the lot of you. It's I who have been a fool, thinking that you were a little different from the rest. . . . And listen to this. I think it's contemptible of you to have forgotten our solemn bargain. For, say what you please, it was a bargain. *You* are the cheat, not I. We were to help each other; and I *have* helped you—God knows I've tried to. Then when *I* want help, oh, no." Her voice broke, and it seemed that tears were coming. But she went on again, dry-eyed, and fiercely reproachful. "Nothing for me—all for you. You're ready to take the last little bit of good out of me to give you pleasure."

"Fernande, I am sorry."

"You may be sorry or glad for all I care. I am done—I am finished. . . . But I'll make you understand. Just listen . . . and take it in if you can. I have nothing to justify, nothing to excuse. What I have felt for you, I—"

And suddenly, unexpectedly, her anger deserted her. She sat down, hid her face on the sofa cushions, and wept.

"Oh, Eric, I think you have broken my heart—all that was left of it unbroken—my poor tired knocked-about heart. . . . No, leave me alone. Don't touch me. I tell you, don't touch me."

He was standing over her, looking down at her dark head, her poor quivering back. And what she said now pierced him, made him bleed. If her heart was broken, so was his.

"Oh, Eric—if you only knew what you are to me. No, what you have been to me—for you're nothing to me after this. Cheated you! How *could* you have said that? When I have given you more than any man has ever had from me—all the best of me—all that was worth having. But that's not enough. You wanted the dregs. You wanted to drag me down again—right down. . . . Oh, God. . . . And I thought because you were clean and good that you would never go back on me—that you'd help me to lift myself and keep above—keep above. . . ."

"Fernande, I am sorry."

"All right. Don't trouble. You—you can just clear out. . . . And don't return here—ever. I don't want to see you again—not ever."

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes, I mean it." She got up, dried her eyes, and stood away from him. "There, good-bye—and good luck." She was hard and firm. "What are you waiting for?"

"Very well," he said. "Good-bye," and he held out his hand.

"No," she said, "I shan't shake hands with you"; and as he went out of the room she was looking at him very much as she had looked at Cyril last night.

But then before he had reached the hall door she came running after him and called him back.

"Eric, stay. I can't let you go like this."

He returned to the room with her, believing that she had relented entirely and that she was about to offer all that she had refused. Yet believing this, he felt no elation. He was tired, worn out.

However, she had no such purpose. She said that in his present temper she could not trust him not to do something foolish, and that certainly work was out of the question for him this afternoon. "Take me somewhere to lunch, Eric. . . . Come, be a man of the world. Don't sulk. . . . Think, we aren't babies—either of us. In a hundred years from now we'll both be dead—or very, very old people"; and she actually laughed. "Then how absurd all this fuss will seem—if we remember it. Eric dear, I challenge you. I am hungry. I want food. Show yourself to be what you are really—a gallant gentleman. I'll just change into something decent. I'll be awfully quick. Then you shall give me lunch at the Hyde Park Hotel, and afterwards you can take me into the Park and we'll sit under the trees or have tea at that place in Kensington Gardens."

And she made him do it.

She was charming; she soothed him; she cooled him. She talked of his work, of his future; and he having adopted an attitude of not any more caring, not any more suffering, most resolutely maintained it. Banishing

all signs of emotion, he ceased for the time to feel any.

When they separated at last she smiled and pressed his hand and whispered to him.

"Eric, send me home easy in my mind. Say it's all right between us."

He did not reply.

"Isn't it all right? The same as before?"

"It's all right, Fernande, but it can never be the same."

"Yes, for *my* sake, Eric—for both our sakes."

She walked away from him quickly, and he stood watching her till she disappeared. He was like a wounded man who has concealed his state in order to go on active duty. Now that the duty had been accomplished his wounds tortured him again.

X

Ten days are a long time in the life of a young man. They can form a period sufficient to soften pain, to take the edge off the sharpest disappointment, to make the most bitter grief seem already at a distance; and this is especially true if, as was the case with Eric Bowen, the young man is actively engaged and being given no leisure during which to brood on himself and his sorrow.

Mr. Cornish had come home, the house was full of movement, with every one busy; at the end of a hard week, but a week full of very interesting work, Eric felt that, self-respect and proper manly pride aiding, he was in a much more healthy condition. His nervous excitement had gone; he was ashamed of having fallen a victim to it. But the resolution made in the midst of his storm of emotional distress had not wavered. That wonderful friendship with Fernande, since she had not allowed it to change in character, must cease altogether.

After the ten days he wrote to her telling her that they must part. Naturally he spoke of his gratitude for all the benefits that she had showered upon him in the past; nor could he refrain from plainly indicating, with words perhaps too impassioned, the new sort of love that she had unfortunately awakened. He was aware that his pen endeavoured to run away with him. He checked it, but did not pull it up short.

"You said, too truly, that the help was all on one side and that I had never helped you; and it is dreadful to me, darling Fernande, to close the account between us with this tremendous debt unpaid, this overwhelming total of gratitude owing to you and never, never to be paid. How can I pay—since you will not take me myself in payment? To remind you that, if you had wished for them, every drop of my blood and every thought of my mind were entirely yours, would only be going back to the forbidden ground of our argument the other day; and you said yourself there must be no going back to it. But please believe and always remember this. If the time comes when I can ever serve you, I will be your faithful servant. I would come from the ends of the earth to help you. There is nothing in the universe that I would not do for you. And this I swear will be as true twenty years hence as it is now."

Then came the note or echo of passion, as he asked for her consent to their parting and begged that she would, as a last generous kindness, aid him to make it irrevocable.

"I have so greatly lost my strength that I could not see you now and not want you. I could not live within reach of you and yet be forced to live without you. I must hear you speak to me and feel you touch me only in memory. But I will act on all your past counsels; so your care and thought will not be wasted. You shall still be my guiding star; but I must follow its reflected light and never dare to raise my eyes and meet its direct rays. They would blind me, they would make me mad. I should want to

pull the star down—again thinking that it was not really millions of miles away, but quite close, within the reach of my hands. That is why I bid you good-bye and say that we must remain apart. Your ever grateful Eric."

She wrote in reply by return of post.

"Thank you, dear Eric, for your very beautiful and poetical letter. I think it is the sweetest letter that a man ever wrote a woman.

"Now let me say at once that on reflection I think you are right. Yes, you are absolutely right, and it shall be as you have decided. Oh, but I am sad. Fernande."

This brief response surprised him and relieved him. She consented. And he thought with a strange mixture of pain and satisfaction that Fernande was gone from him, but his career, all his hopes of worthy achievement, of doing some decent work in the world decently, now remained to him.

He thought of her tenderly and sadly, almost as one thinks of the dead, feeling the widely diffused but not altogether unbearable pain that comes to us with our recollection of those we once loved and have long lost. It was as if he said to himself, "Whatever she denied or held back from me, whatever my doubts of her, I never really doubted that in the depths of her heart she was fond of me and true to me. And now darkness and loneliness have come again between her and me. She was, and she has ceased to be. With these living eyes of mine I shall never see her again—my sweet magical Fernande."

Three days later he was having tea with her at Claridge's.

She insisted on an oral leave-taking. She had no wish to upset their settled plans—far from it,—but they must meet and have this final talk; for otherwise, as she said, there would be a soreness, even a sense of personal humiliation, in all her memory of their adieux.

They sat in a corner as remote as possible from other tea-drinkers, and there were long silences when neither spoke. Dressed in black and very simply, she had an aspect so spiritualised as to make her seem weak and fragile. Altogether, and on both sides, the thing was a tender fluttering sort of experience, like the meal of two convalescents in a hospital the first time that they are allowed to sit up after an operation.

"I shall never come here again," she said, with a kind of gently resigned sadness. "It was here that we made our vows. Do you remember? I begin to hate these places. They get on my nerves. They are places of hope and renunciation, of promises and farewells."

Then after another silence she spoke in a low hurried voice.

"Eric dear, is it really necessary to tear ourselves into little bits? You say you're weak, but you aren't really. You're very strong. I never guessed that you possessed so much strength"; and she asked him if they might not meet from time to time, not very often, but occasionally, in the old happy way. "I should like to, Eric"; and she looked at him, smiling piteously. "Half a loaf—even a few crumbs from the loaf—would be better than no bread at all."

He told her very gently that this was impossible. As he had said, he could not trust himself.

"But you can trust *me*, Eric. I won't make you unhappy again."

Then she said that a friend of Cyril's, a rich Jewish lady, had lent them a cottage on the river near Pangbourne, and that at least Eric must agree to spend one week-end there with them, if only for the sake of appearances. Cyril already was asking suspicious questions. Things would be horribly difficult for her if Cyril discovered that there was a complete break of the ancient bond.

"So you have made it up with Cyril?"

"Oh, yes," she said wearily. "He has had a lesson. Besides— But, no, I won't afflict you with my petty annoyances. Now," and she smiled again, not quite so sadly, "what about next Saturday to Monday?"

He told her that he could not go to stay with them at the borrowed cottage.

"Very well. Then I won't urge you—at any rate not now. Eric dear, I'm not going to be selfish. I promise you I won't be selfish."

"You are never selfish, Fernande."

"I have tried not to be, with you. . . . No, I have been too fond of you for that. Yet many people would say I have done you a great wrong. . . . I can't help it, dear. But above all I want you to know that I understand your state of mind."

She had preserved that air of spirituality till now; but now she began to make suggestions of a very material

character, and the brisk businesslike manner that he was almost forgetting began to assert itself.

"You know, Eric, I shall be frightfully anxious about you—first, because you won't have me to take care of you; and secondly, because it is after a crisis of this kind that men run into dangers and get into bad messes. Of course the best thing for you at the present time would be to find some other woman who could be to you all that I can't be."

"No, no."

"Yes, dear—some one nice and safe, to make you happy again—to make you forget me altogether."

"I shall never do that, Fernande."

"Dear Eric."

Her charm was upon him; and yet, although he protested against her suggestion, he knew that in it there was essential wisdom. He felt now that in spite of hard work and perhaps big success the world would be for him very dull and blank. He would be miserably lonely. She had taught him the habit of feminine companionship, and perhaps he could not do without it. If not hers, then somebody else's.

He went to the riverside cottage. She made him go to it for the last week-end that she and Cyril would themselves spend there.

He had heard her voice, not as he proposed in memory, but on the telephone. It was late at night, and her words sounded close to him in the silent room, as though mysteriously she had come to his bedside and was stooping over him to get her lips near to his ear.

"Yes, you must come, dear, for your own sake, not for mine. You are to meet a nice little new friend. . . . Eric, are you listening? I have found a playmate for you. Young, pretty, and no scruples. What do you say to that?"

"That you are very kind, but it's no good."

"Nonsense. You don't mean that, really"; once more she seemed to have read his half-acknowledged thoughts. "An ideal playmate for my lonely boy. Do you hear?" And she laughed faintly. "She is quite emancipated. So this time you may be as enterprising as you like."

"Fernande, why do you say all this?"

"Hush. I'll tell you about the train to-morrow. You're to come early in the afternoon. Yes, you shall have every opportunity."

Then the voice grew sad and serious.

"Now, am I unselfish or not? Would any other woman prove her love—for I do love you, Eric—would she prove it in this particular way, as I am doing?"

"But I don't want such a proof. I don't like it." He went on talking until another voice spoke, a masculine voice, asking him what number he required, and he understood that Fernande had disconnected the wire.

Her party at the cottage consisted of Cyril, Eric, old Mr. Letronne, the art critic, who was an undeviatingly faithful admirer or follower of hers, and, lastly, Miss Daphne Anderson.

They had now reached mid-October; but on this Saturday and Sunday the weather was amazingly kind, giving them warm tranquil airs, soft skies, and a sunshine that was bright without strength, joyous without fierceness.

The river lay shining and trembling in the gentle glow; with fiery woodlands, brown ridges, green meadows, on either hand. Pursuing her solicitous plans, Fernande sent her two young guests out in a dinghy to enjoy the afternoon and to become better acquainted.

"Don't drown yourselves," she said with a rather spurious gaiety, "and come back before five. Mr. Letronne wants a game of bridge after tea."

"Isn't she sweet?" said Miss Daphne Anderson, as the tiny boat glided away with Eric sculling. "I have always thought all the world of her. She's more than fascinating, she's magnetic. I love being with her."

"But you don't see a great deal of her, do you?"

"No—not nearly as much as I should like. Of course that's so wonderful with her, one seems to know her quite well at once—and then she rather keeps you at arm's length. Do you know what I mean? Cyril is easier of approach," and Daphne laughed. "Cyril is too awful, isn't he? I don't stick at a trifle. But Cyril *is* the limit, isn't he? . . . What was I saying? Oh, Fernande, yes. I adore her. But, if you understand, I have wooed her, but never won her. She's like that. Perhaps I oughtn't to have expected anything else in my case. What could a magnificent splendid clever woman of her sort want with a poor little ass like me? Yet I always feel I'd sooner go to her if I was in a hole than to any one I know. I'd sooner confess my sins to her than any one—I mean if I had kicked over the traces higher than usual—if I had steeped myself in crime. She would be terribly shocked, but she'd *help*—she'd help for all she was worth."

"I am sure she would."

"Well, I was never more surprised in my life, but I jumped for joy, when I got her letter inviting me here. Shall I tell you what she said?" And Miss Daphne laughed again. "She said that I was going to meet a very attractive young man."

"I suppose he will be coming down by a later train," said Eric, smiling. "Evidently he hasn't arrived yet."

"Oh, he's here all right—the person she meant. Of course I can't say if the description is justified. I'll tell you on Monday morning. . . . But Fernande forgot something. I have met the person before. Naturally he himself has forgotten it. I never make a lasting impression."

"But I beg your pardon, I remember perfectly. We met at dinner at the Faulkners'."

Daphne was that girl who had been at the flat on the night when he first saw Fernande. It seemed that he had scarcely noticed her then, and yet in fact he now remembered her appearance quite well. But she had changed; in maturing a little she had improved. She was still absurdly young. Her fair hair, her unpainted sun-burnt face with freckles on each smooth cheek, her friendly blue eyes, her quick, almost bird-like movements of her head, all enhanced the aspect of extreme and innocent youth. Eric, looking at her, so fresh and apparently untried by life, felt twinges of regret that she was not really innocent, but rather the reverse. He observed that she had acquired a curiously energetic way of talking, varying this, however, with her original childish style of prattle. And instead of giggling she now laughed, rather prettily. On the whole, Daphne was not without charm.

He drew her on to talk of herself.

As it seemed, she plainly disclosed her emancipated condition. She said she had given her father and mother fits by determining to lead an independent life. They could not stop her, poor dears, because she had a little money of her own, "mighty little," four hundred a year, just enough to go to the devil with, as daddy said. She was an artist, mad keen but without a scrap of talent, painting pictures that also gave fits. She lived with another girl and shared a studio. They belonged to a group of girls of similar tastes, with crowds of boy friends—darlings, rotters, and sheer dead-beats.

Eric had ceased to scull, they were drifting idly with the stream.

"Now," she said, "my turn, please. It's time I did a little work."

Of all boats a dinghy is the most intimate. The rower and the rowed are so very near together that they can see each transient facial expression, the colour of eyes, the shape of teeth; and when they exchange positions they are forced to do a certain amount of holding or clinging lest the friendly little boat should upset with them. In these circumstances all sense of strangeness soon wears off, acquaintance ripens quickly.

Eric was sculling again as they came back towards the house and gardens of the rich Jewish lady. Dusk was falling, all the light had gone from the wooded ridge, and an immense golden sky disdained to war against the deepening shadows. Fernande, waiting for them on the landing-stage, heard their voices and their laughter as the boat drew near, creeping through the twilight. She

clenched her hands and bit her lip, but was very gay, laughing herself now that they were silent, as she aided Daphne to alight and reproached them both for being atrociously late.

"Does it matter?" said Daphne.

"No, not a bit," said Fernande, and they all three walked together to the house.

This riverside cottage was in fact a villa of the largest size; richly furnished, full of a commonplace luxuriousness, with all the usual refinements both of comfort and decoration that are provided by tradesmen for wealthy clients not apt at picking and choosing. Mrs. Adolph Lynch, the widowed owner, was on the continent; but her servants were here, her food, her wines, liqueurs, and cigarettes. She had lent to Cyril no mere empty shell, but a going concern. Distant, invisible, yet lavishly hospitable, she was the real hostess, not Fernande, and many little jokes were made concerning her. The art critic spoke of her as Cyril's latest conquest. Fernande spoke of her contemptuously in this relation, saying that grey hair had no terror for Cyril and she believed he made all his lady loves show him their bank book before declaring his passion. "Tennyson must have been thinking of people like you, Cyril, when he said 'Dinna philander for money, but go where money is.' "

Cyril bore these gentle chaffings with great equanimity. He said gravely that Mrs. Adolph Lynch was a real friend, one in a thousand, a woman of the highest intelligence.

They were having tea in Mrs. Lynch's oak parlour, a room that the decorators had thought would stimulate the

imagination. It might be Early English or Early German or of any other period.

Daphne looked pretty without her hat; her fair hair shone in the firelight, for logs were blazing on the period hearth to give cheerfulness rather than warmth. She was demure, charming, as she stood by Fernande's side at the tea-table and then carried tea-cups and cake-dishes. "No, please let me," she said prettily. "I love pretending to be domestic." She told Cyril to sit quiet. "You know, old age has its privileges"; and she smiled at them all.

Eric, as he watched her, thought, and again with regret, what a pity it was that her morals were not as good as her manners. It was like the regret that one feels when one looks at a seemingly original work of art and is told that it is in truth a copy, a sham, not at all what it appears to be. Fernande watched him watching her. Indeed she observed him narrowly throughout these two days.

At dinner Daphne talked wildly and foolishly. Both the elder men applauded her, and lured her to fresh audacities; Mr. Letronne, blinking his heavy eyelids, quivering like a large suet pudding, chuckling hoarsely; while Cyril sniggered and murmured, "Angelic. Priceless. You surpass yourself, my cherub." Fernande let her talk, made no slightest attempt to stop her, but instead watched Eric's face as if trying to see what effect was being made upon him.

After dinner on the Sunday Eric and Daphne went for a stroll in the garden, and prolonged their absence inordinately. Or so it seemed to Fernande. She went out on the gravel by the lighted windows listening for their

voices. Then she came back to the room and stood near the wood fire shivering.

"Cyril, it's cold. Did that fool of a girl take a cloak with her? If not, she'll catch her death of cold."

"Oh, I expect Eric won't let her do that," said Cyril, sniggering. "He'll do his best to keep her warm."

Then Fernande was angry. "Oh, for God's sake don't try to be funny"; and she stamped her foot on Mrs. Lynch's parquetry hearth.

"What's the matter? Why so nervy all at once?"

"Your beastly disgusting attempts at humour are enough to make any one nervy"; and Fernande endeavoured to laugh, because her fat admirer, Mr. Letronne, was looking at her wonderingly.

"Honestly those two ought to come in. . . . Cyril, go and fetch them."

"No, my beloved. Go yourself, if you like. My motto is Live and let Live."

Then at last Fernande did go.

"Look at the clock," she cried suddenly. "It's five minutes to eleven. They must be mad"; and she hurried out of the room.

This time she saw them at once. They were coming along a broad path that led past the lawns to a summer-house. They came silently, side by side, but with nearly all the space of the path between them, and Fernande asked herself if they had unlinked their hands and arms just before they came into sight.

"Ah, there you are," she said loudly. "I was getting absolutely frightened about you. I'm glad you took a wrap, Daphne."

Daphne went to bed almost immediately, and Eric sat with the others. He was very silent, obviously not listening to their talk, full of his own thoughts. Fernande asked herself a hundred questions.

She noticed at breakfast next day that he and Daphne scarcely spoke to each other. During the short train journey everybody was reading newspapers. At Paddington they all parted. She saw Eric carrying a bag for Daphne and putting it in a taxi-cab. He shut the cab door, took off his hat, and came back to say good-bye to Fernande.

"Good-bye, Eric," she said, looking at him anxiously. "Take care of yourself."

She did not see him again for more than six months.

XI

He was back among the realities.

"Now, young man," said Mr. Cornish jovially, "it's high time to see what you're really made of. You and I must put our heads together."

Cornish was giving all his attention to the marvellous new concrete that he had named "Virilite"; it was doing very well, but he intended to make it do much better; he wanted to have a big boom for virilite, then to wash his hands of it and think of something else.

"So you can pack your traps, Bowen, and be off to the works. Get a room at Rochester and stay a fortnight. I can't give you longer."

And he further explained that, swotting all day and all night too if necessary, Bowen was to master virilite, its manufacture, its uses, its ultimate possibilities.

"When you return I expect you to know as much about it as I do myself," said Cornish; "so that if I wanted, I could make you my representative in the whole business. Ha, ha," and he laughed. "That makes you stare. What's to-day? The sixteenth. Very well. Return on the first of November."

Eric had his fourteen days of concrete, and returned with stores of knowledge and a satisfactory testimonial from the manager of the works.

Then there were some public demonstrations of the manifold virtues of the material itself. On the slope of a hill above the Medway high thin walls of virilite had been

erected, fantastic roofless houses, fairylike girderless bridges of virilite, and these were attacked with hydraulic battering rams, dynamite cartridges, and other destructive agents—and of course all to no purpose. The wonderful virilite resisted every enemy. There were other erections at a convenient distance, vast beflagged tents containing a plethoric luncheon for the innumerable visitors, who included among them potentates of the first magnitude, minor notabilities such as generals in command of districts, admirals of the fleet, members of both Houses of Parliament, as well as a very strong muster of newspaper reporters. The hillside seemed black with people when Cornish arrived in his car.

"Bustle about among the pressmen," he said to Bowen. "Be busy, my lad. Sing the song to them. Stick like wax to them—and see they have enough to drink."

It was a successful day, and a little later he announced that he felt pleased with Bowen's intelligent activity.

"Yes, you're doing well," he said, smiling. "So now I am going to throw a biscuit to a good dog."

He explained then that he had made up his mind to spend a hundred thousand pounds on advertising virilite.

"A hundred thousand pounds," Eric echoed, feeling staggered by the magnitude of the sum, and thinking of poor Mr. Rice, the advertisement manager of the *Gazette*. What would Mr. Rice have thought had he heard such a figure mentioned in regard to advertising?

"No doubt it seems a lot of money to you," said Cornish; "and it *is* a lot of money—a lot to go out unless you are sure of more coming in. But nowadays there's no use in fiddling away at advertising. You must do it or leave

it alone. It's the small advertisers, not the big ones, that lose their money."

Then he said he wanted Eric at once to set about making a plan for this publicity campaign. The plan or scheme should be worked out in conjunction with two well-known firms of advertisement contractors and agents, but it was to be Eric's scheme. He said that with all his journalistic experience Eric ought to know the ways of advertising inside out; he should be able to secure the cleverest artists, the best writers, and so on; and he must "get right down to it and swot again." The scheme when approved must be carried out within a month, for Cornish desired "to hit hard and fast." Finally he said that Eric was to make a bargain to share their commission with the advertisement agents. "Half and half. They'll jump at the chance. And that'll put a little money in your pocket without taking any out of mine. The newspaper people will allow them anything up to ten per cent on their orders. That would be ten thousand. Divide ten thousand by two. Five thousand. Not to be sneezed at, eh?" And Mr. Cornish rubbed his hands together and laughed contentedly. "That's what I call throwing a biscuit. And there's plenty more biscuits in the box."

His scheme was approved, and Eric conducted the business to an end, with a slight modification as to its money terms. By consenting to take less than a half share, he made those two firms agree to work on a seven instead of a ten per cent basis and to put back the balance of their commission into the scheme. Thus Mr. Cornish was given a hundred and three thousand pounds' worth of advertising instead of the one hundred thousand's worth

for which he paid. Eric, in his turn explaining, diffidently reported all this.

"Then what do you get out of it, Bowen?"

"Over two thousand pounds."

"I see. You might have done better for yourself, but then you wouldn't have done so well for me. Yes, that's as it should be. Good. Very good."

Soon then he announced that he intended to launch virilite as a company and that he saw no reason why he should not make Eric a director. Eric could use some of his recently acquired cash for the purchase of qualifying shares.

"Do you know anything about the Stock Exchange?"

Eric said yes, and he gratefully blessed Fernande for having made him study city matters.

"You don't know anything about the law?"

Again Eric said yes. He had worked in a solicitor's office, intending to be a lawyer.

"Why, upon my soul," said Cornish, "you are a treasure. You'll do me credit before I've done with you. My prototype;" and he told Eric to get into touch immediately with the solicitors and the stockbrokers of the new company. "They have started at the prospectus. Get down to it with them. You shall have the advertising. That'll be something more for you to pick up."

Biscuit followed biscuit. Cornish told him to buy tea shares, to sell tea shares and buy oil shares, to sell out of oil and go back in to tea. The elder man took an amused and delighted interest in the younger man's money-making; he frequently asked what was his balance at his bankers, how much had he made up to now, what was he

worth all told; and he laughed gaily at the modest but rapidly increasing amounts. He was so rich himself that these diminutive operations gave him the pleasure that one feels in watching a child play with its toys.

During this winter it seemed to be generally thought that Eric was destined to become Mr. Cornish's first lieutenant and right-hand man. Wherever he went, flattering speeches were made to him. "If ever we can be of use to you personally, Mr. Bowen, I hope you won't scruple to let us know." The firm, the agency, the organisation, or whatever it was, would at any time be very much at Mr. Bowen's disposal.

Even the once redoubtable Miss Barrett, editor of *Beautiful Houses,* told him that he could command her. He was amused by Miss Barrett. She had humbly craved for a visit from him, and as he made his august entry to the editorial floor the young ladies of the staff looked at him as if he himself was the great man and not merely the shadow of another's greatness. It seemed to him many years since that day when he departed from Burlington Gardens in coldness and silence.

Miss Barrett, with the sweetest smiles, said she had trespassed on his good nature and dragged him here because she desired on behalf of her employers to make a communication which she thought was too delicate to put into writing; and she thanked him profusely for giving the Cornish advertisements to their group of newspapers.

"We appreciate it very highly; for we know well that you must have exerted all your influence to remove soreness from Mr. Cornish's mind and bring the old feud to an end."

Eric remembered then what she had said of hostility and a quarrel. He had not thought of it again. He told her now that on Mr. Cornish's part there had never been any quarrel.

"Oh, surely?" And Miss Barrett raised her eyebrows. "But you are very diplomatic. In any event," and she smiled again, "we *thank* you, Mr. Bowen, for the service you have done us, and of course at any future time you may command us."

Eric reported this conversation, and, as he had anticipated, Cornish said he knew nothing of any quarrel.

"If I have rubbed them the wrong way it has been inadvertently"; and he gave Eric a little lecture on the fine traditions of our British press. "A great institution, my lad—as I'm always patriotically proud to acknowledge. Who is the boss of this concern?"

"Lord Danesferry."

"Of course. A fine fellow. That's a man who has rendered great service to his country. Now look here. You had better call on his lordship, and put this thing absolutely straight for me. Say I sent you."

And this was done by Eric in due course.

He enjoyed his work. It was varied, quickly changing, absorbingly interesting. One day he might be sent to Portsmouth dockyard to meet Admiralty officials, the next to a great northern town to sing the song of virilite to its municipal rulers, the day after to the continent. As soon as a thing was finished, one passed on to something else. More than the money-making he liked his work itself, and more than the work he liked his employer. Personal gratitude had little part in his increasing regard,

and hopes of favours to come had none at all. He liked him instinctively, unavoidably, because of his kindness, his essential goodness.

Quite naturally, then, and without shyness or pretension, he began to look after him as far as was possible. He saved him from unnecessary fatigue, did for him many things that till now he had always done for himself, generally made the pressures of life easier and lighter for him.

In January they went together to Egypt to inspect the great dam, which was now approaching completion. Those were three splendid weeks of sunlight, colour, impressive sights, and interesting experiences. Never was Cornish so visibly a potentate as when travelling. Hotels, boats, trains, seemed to belong to him; chairmen of companies, directors, general managers, met him at carriage doors and on ship gangways; his journey out and home was planned and scheduled with as much thought and care as if half an army had been moving. But at Cairo he fell ill with a sharp touch of influenza. Feverish and aching, he resolutely declared that he would not have a single arrangement altered, that nothing should stop him from going straight home. Then Eric asserted himself. He cancelled all arrangements, summoned doctors, put Cornish to bed, and faithfully nursed him. The doctors said he had saved Cornish's life, or that his life might have been thrown away if he had had no one there to control him.

"I hate fussing, and I didn't *feel* ill," said Cornish. "But I suppose you were right, Eric."

After this he always called him Eric instead of Bowen.

In confidential moments he would talk about his family very freely, philosophising after his simple wont, and mingling with the generalities some of those sharp direct applications and luminous flashes of common sense which proved without a shadow of doubt that his head was truly screwed on the right way. This was his highest compliment for anybody. Experience seemed to have taught him that the number of men and women whose heads are screwed on the wrong way is immensely large. He was too shrewd not to see that his own relations, just as much as his friends and business allies, were bound to him chiefly by what they could get from him. He accepted this as a law of life, and the knowledge, if it occasionally gave him discomfort, did not seriously trouble him. His two married daughters, although of course handsomely provided for, were always on the lookout for more. They made much of "the dear old dad," but they expected much in return.

When indicating thus plainly a certain inevitable hollowness in the heart of his domesticity, he never failed to cite two great exceptions to that rule of life about which he had philosophised. These were his mother and his youngest daughter. Old Mrs. Cornish looked for nothing and would take nothing. Ruth Cornish was fond of him for his own sake.

"I call her my Cordelia," said her father, with feeling. "You know the allusion? . . . Yes, that's a good girl, Ruth is. Courageous. Heaps of courage, no nonsense. You may take it from me, my little Ruth has her head screwed on the right way."

He dreaded the time when she would marry and leave

him. She was twenty-three already. There had been several proposals for her hand, but she had "turned them down properly. No shilly-shally. Much obliged, but nothing doing." Nevertheless the right man would come along sooner or later, and then it would be "Good-bye, daddy." Mr. Cornish sighed heavily.

He rarely spoke of his son, and on these occasions with evident reluctance. John, as a rule called John Junior, and familiarly J. J., was a disappointment, not a comfort to him. He admitted this failure and made the best of it, not ceasing to care for John, but letting John go his own way, which was very far afield—to the Riviera, Palm Beach, Florida, California, and other soft luxurious places all over the world where the idle rich wear fine clothes, play easy games, and pursue pleasure consistently, but languidly. In fact, as Eric learned from other sources, J. J. was simply null. At twenty-eight he was like a boy of sixteen mentally, playing truant, shirking all tasks. He said himself that his father's arduous labours had mysteriously tired him. He was born without energy because his father had been too energetic. He scarcely ever came to London.

The oldest daughter, named Agnes after her mother, had married that comfortable well-to-do plebeian, Thomas Evans, in the earlier stages of her father's fortune, and she remained with a distinctly middle-class stamp upon her. She was broadening fast to an uninteresting maturity. The second daughter, Mrs. Headingley, Jane or Janey, blooming at a later and more prosperous period, had married the son of a peer and become quite a lady of the grand world. She had fewer children than Agnes and was

altogether much more fashionable and attractive. She appeared to be naturally amiable. Eric, who had exchanged but few words with either of them, liked her better than Agnes.

The young unmarried Ruth was musical; and, big as the house was, the gentle strains of the violin on which she practised assiduously sometimes floated high and low as invisible doors opened and shut in the great first-floor lobbies. She seemed to be a proud, reserved sort of girl, not ill-looking, but stiff in manner, probably oppressed with the weighty grandeurs of her position. No doubt she felt like a princess. Eric thought of her as the princess in a fairy tale making short work of all the suitors who came to win her and the half of her father's kingdom. No wonder she was proud. But she loved the old king.

The first time she ever spoke to Eric Bowen she showed this natural affection. It was after the trip to Egypt.

"Thank you, Mr. Bowen, for being so good to father."

As she said this Eric noticed her eyes, like the eyes of a short-sighted person, although she was not short-sighted, a kind of shy peering look in them; and he seemed to understand then that she was not proud, but merely reserved—rather nice really.

She said no more.

The family in fact still remained outside his sphere of duty. From time to time he had luncheon with them, but he was not called in any way to enter their social life. This pleased him, because it left him full freedom to seek society elsewhere. Soon now, however, Mr. Cornish began to ask him more frequently to join the mid-day party.

He tried to excuse himself, but Mr. Cornish said, "No. I want you. I like to see plenty of faces round me."

Observing him at the head of the vast luncheon table, one could not doubt that this was true. He sat with his back to the light in order the better to enjoy the sight of all the faces. Behind him to his left there was a round table occupied by the children, governesses, and so forth; and when Mrs. Evans or Mrs. Headingley speaking from the long table told the children they were making too much noise, he turned and begged them to make more noise. He loved the chorus of treble voices swelling louder. Behind his right elbow there was another round table kept in readiness for a possible inrush of guests. It was open house. People were asked by telephone, met and brought in from the street, or they presented themselves of their own accord. The servants after long practice were extraordinarily adroit in laying more places, finding room, adjusting things rapidly.

And Cornish, like Napoleon during the consulate, gave himself without restraint to the innocent domestic revel. It was the best hour of the day for him. He relaxed, expanded, overflowed in kindly patriarchal hospitality. Important people were put near him, habitués at a distance, and stragglers and unexpected late arrivals anywhere. Miss Rivers-Paine, the private secretary, often sat near Mr. Round, a queer bald silent old fellow in a tightly buttoned black coat who could be met at any hour wandering about the house. He was a legendary friend of the host, possibly even a poor relation of the late Mrs. Cornish. Lady Emily Gale always sat within speaking distance, in order to prompt Mr. Cornish if celebrated per-

sons, such as famous actors, authors, or musicians, happened to be present, and to lead the conversation with her consummate tact. Tactful Lady Emily was retained as a sort of lady-in-waiting to Ruth. She helped the house in all its more formal entertainments, and was supposed to be able to produce an unlimited number of "celebrities" for Cornish's amusement.

Cornish was jovially attentive alike to the illustrious and to the humble. He listened to them courteously, then told them his anecdotes, cracked his favourite little jokes, and sometimes harangued them on some big public question rather too much in his board-room manner, with heads to the argument. "Firstly, secondly. . . . Point Number One. . . . Point Number Two. Do you follow me?" He mispronounced a few words, misused a few—as when he laughingly told them of his prototype now following in his footsteps and taking after him in all respects—but no one who knew his history could think the worse of him for these trifling slips. He had been his own tutor, and all things considered had taught well.

After the repast he liked his ladies to sit at the table smoking their cigarettes instead of hurrying away, but he let them pull their chairs back and break into groups, changing places, and so on. Also he permitted earlier departures if made for business reasons.

"Are you going, Eric? What's your job today?"

Eric said he intended to visit those Kentish paper mills that had recently been purchased.

"All right," said Cornish, and his eyes followed him to the door with a look of affection that perhaps several people in the room noticed.

"How nice he is. I consider your Mr. Bowen absolutely charming," said Lady Emily, making herself agreeable to her paymaster.

"Yes," said Cornish, rather grimly, "I am quite satisfied with him, thank you."

An hour later Eric was motoring fast along a hard chalk road well outside the suburbs of London. It was an open car and he drove himself. The weather was fine, the sun shone with promises of an approaching spring, the powerful and expensive car ran smoothly.

If he was now counting the blessings conferred upon him by fate, there were indeed many for which to offer thanks. He was still young, full of health, with unimpaired strength; he had passed through a dangerous phase so completely as to look back at it as only a silly phase; the trust shown to him by Cornish made him trust himself. Prosperity was his for the grasping. As well as the concrete affair he had two directorships in small companies; he was receiving directors' fees, dividends from shares, and a noble salary; and beyond all this he was worth four or five thousand pounds. He possessed a working capital. Lastly he had, sitting by his side in the car, a fair-haired talkative travelling companion. But whether this was really a blessing or no he did not as yet feel quite sure.

The people at the mills had seen the fair-haired girl in the car on one or two previous occasions. They thought she must be Mr. Bowen's sister, of course not knowing that Eric was an only child.

XII

One afternoon in April Miss Daphne Anderson, responding to the last of many pressing invitations, went to tea with Mrs. Faulkner at Chelsea.

Mrs. Faulkner's sitting-room looked far shabbier than in the past, but everything had been done to prepare it for the reception of the visitor. The tea-things, with nice little cakes, thin bread and butter, sandwiches, stood in readiness. There were daffodils in vases and primroses in a large bowl. Mrs. Faulkner herself was anxiously waiting. She welcomed Miss Anderson effusively, extending both hands together, and at once reproached the girl for her long neglect, saying she was a naughty unkind child.

"I know. I am sorry," said Daphne. "But I have been a bit rattled."

The winter had obliterated Daphne's sunburn and removed most of her freckles; and somehow her manner had altered. She was comparatively subdued, diffident, without the old perkiness. Fernande, pouring out the tea and pushing forward the dainty little cakes, was aware of this slight change. It made her feel more worried and anxious than before. She shrank from learning that which she had got the girl here to tell her.

Presently she brought out a cigarette, slowly fitted it into one of her long holders, and lighted it. When she spoke next her face was very hard.

"Of course I am dying to hear all about you and Eric Bowen."

Daphne moved in her chair uncomfortably and turned away her head.

"Tell me, my dear. All of it, from the beginning."

But Daphne hesitated. She seemed reluctant to tell anything at all.

"Why this shyness? Out with it, Daphne. I want to hear first what happened at the cottage. He made love to you?"

"Well, yes—if you could call it making love," and Daphne stopped.

"Go on. Don't pretend to be covered with bashful confusion." Fernande was puffing fast at the cigarette and watching closely. She felt like a person who has been long suffering from the dull anguish of an injured limb, and now wilfully uses it roughly although certain that far worse pain must result from thus disobeying the doctor's orders. Nevertheless she showed no emotion. Her voice was unshaken, quiet and firm. "Didn't *you* call it love?"

Then Daphne, pink of cheek, embarrassed, piteous, said, "Fernande, will you be as secret as the grave if I tell you? I want to. But it's so difficult;" and again she hesitated. "Oh, I *can* trust you, can't I, Fernande?"

"Of course you can."

"Yes, I know I can. . . . Well, he upset me most frightfully at Pangbourne."

"Really? How did he do that?"

"It wasn't what he *did*. He didn't do much. It was his tone—what he implied. He seemed to think I was

the sort of girl who would be ready to go and live with a man if she liked him."

"Well, aren't you that sort of girl?" asked Fernande calmly.

"Fernande!"

Daphne was in great distress.

Fernande said she was sorry, but really she did not know. "You young girls are all a mystery to me. D'you mean you're quite a good girl in the old-fashioned sense —the technical sense?"

"Of *course* I am," said Daphne, crimson-cheeked. "Fernande, don't be horrible."

"No, I won't. But, frankly, I am astonished. And those other girls you consort with, are you going to say that they are—I can only think of the old-fashioned words—virtuous? Straight?"

"Every one of them. . . . Straight—but not straight-laced." And Daphne went on very piteously to ask who had been slandering them all. "I had a feeling that he—Eric Bowen, you know—had heard odious things about me. As if some one had told him I was a horrid kind of little beast. Do you think anybody had?"

"I should think it extremely likely."

"How wicked."

Fernande threw her cigarette away and drew long delicious breaths of the untainted air. The constriction of her heart was gone, it had space and ease; the throbbing and burning of her brain had ceased; she felt a relief that was greater than happiness. She smiled tolerantly and lectured the girl with gentle firmness.

"If you don't want people to think it of you, why do

you behave as you do? Why do you pose as a tart? Why do you tell vulgar improper stories—men's stories? Why do you wink? Why do you cheapen yourself in every possible way, going about with Tom, Dick, and Harry anywhere they choose to take you, and at all hours of the day and night?"

Daphne, more and more distressed, said in effect that the reason had been, as Fernande herself once said, just bravado, the desire of attracting attention, silliness; also perhaps, if she must confess such weakness, a mere copying of smart people—or of the symbolically smart people that are shown to the public in modern stage plays and up-to-date novels.

"So that's the end of you and Mr. Bowen," Fernande said briskly and contentedly.

But Daphne said no, it was not the end. It was only the beginning—an account of which Fernande had asked for. The end promised to be "rather exciting."

"Really?" said Fernande. "Then go on again. I need not say I am deeply interested."

Anxiety had returned, sharper and more insupportable after the respite. The life went out of her face, the firmness out of her voice.

Daphne on the other hand had brightened; she settled herself comfortably in her chair and talked without faltering. She described how to her surprise Eric Bowen had come to see her at the studio, and, with no reference to that little misunderstanding or to her plainly expressed resentment, had made himself very agreeable. She for her part had been "as frigid as be blowed," giving him no encouragement to suppose that he was welcome or that she

desired another visit from him. Nevertheless he came again. Gradually he made himself at home there. Her house mate, Enid Yorke, liked him; everybody liked him. He took her and Enid to the play, went with them to dances, was "jolly decent" to them. During this winter she and he had become quite "pally." Sometimes he had taken her with him motoring when he had to go out of London on business; he dropped in to see her at odd times; often he spent the evening quietly with her, just talking.

"*I* see," said Fernande. "*I* understand."

And now, as Daphne related cheerfully, she believed that the end was near. She believed, she felt almost sure, that he intended to ask her to marry him.

"To *marry* him!" Fernande, amazed, incredulous, sat staring at her, and then with the same emphasis repeated the unexpected word. "*Marry* him! What makes you think that?"

He had arranged that on Sunday he would take her out in his car for the whole day. They were going to Brighton. Just before this arrangement was made he had talked in a new and significant style.

"How? Do you mean, saying he was in love with you, and couldn't do without you?"

No Daphne did not mean that. He had talked of his only living relative, a Miss Rawlings, of his youth with her at Widmarsh; of his present circumstances, his future prospects, and ever so much more, "quite private stuff," saying it all as if he wished Daphne now to learn everything about him. Then he suddenly broke off and spoke of Sunday at Brighton, Daphne there and then coming to

the conclusion that it was merely a postponement, and that he had decided to wait for the long and happy day they were about to spend together and during the course of it—in old-fashioned terms—"to pop the question."

"And it won't be my fault if he doesn't," said Daphne, sprightly and gay, giggling in her earliest manner.

"Sunday," said Fernande. "That's the day after to-morrow!"

"Yes, it's rather fun, isn't it?" Then in a moment Daphne became piteous again. "No, it isn't fun. It's deadly earnest, I think, for *me*. Oh, Fernande darling, I can't humbug—not to you. I like him, you know. I like him most frightfully."

"Do you?"

"Yes." And Daphne was more piteous still. "He *is* all right, isn't he? Not a bit what I thought him at first—utterly different."

"That's for you to judge."

"I mean high-minded, naturally. Oh, let's be old-fashioned again. He's really a *nice* man, isn't he?"

Fernande was silent, as if meditating. After a pause she answered with quiet strength.

"Yes, he is perfect—in my opinion. About the best and the most noble nature I have ever come across."

"Oh, thank you so much."

"You needn't thank me," said Fernande coldly.

After the visitor had gone she sat by the hearth for a long time thinking.

It has been said that we all begin by feeling independent and end by knowing that we are not.

Some such thought was in the mind of Eric Bowen, about seven o'clock on that Saturday evening, as he walked along the Chelsea embankment on his way to call, by appointment, upon Fernande. He had resolved and thought that he would never again see the glass-panelled door, the dark little hall, those tattered sofa cushions, or anything else in that flat. But nevertheless he was going there now. He possessed no choice.

She had written to remind him of a promise and had claimed its fulfilment. He had said—in his "beautiful and poetical letter"—that if she were in trouble he would go to her aid from the ends of the earth. What else could he do but go—from the infinitely lesser distance of Carlton House Terrace?

"How well you are looking, Eric. Inches bigger round the chest, aren't you? Won't you sit down?"

They had shaken hands, and she went at once to the hearth, where a fire was burning, and stood there with her back towards him. She seemed nervous rather than distressed, and he thought that she was trying to compose herself and think how she was to start her communication. He had little doubt that Cyril would prove to be the cause of the disaster, whatever it was.

"Fernande," he said, "don't be afraid to tell me. I expect it's pretty bad. But I am quite prepared. You know you can rely on me."

She did not answer. She was looking down at the flaming coals, and with the point of her shoe she pushed back one of them that protruded over the bars of the grate.

"Fernande, what is it? You say you are in trouble."

"Yes, I am in the very greatest trouble. But the trouble is about you, Eric, not about myself."

"I don't follow."

"You are thinking of doing something supremely foolish—and you mustn't do it."

"What do you mean?"

"You know very well what I mean. Your looks betray you. Guilty! Guilty!" She had become maternal now. Coming nearer to him, with a smile that broadened, she spoke in the playful archly tender manner which mothers assume towards a child they mean to chide but not to punish. "You see, the naughty secret is found out. Deny it if you dare. You have half made up your mind to marry that girl Daphne."

He flushed. He was angry, confused.

"If I have—how do you know? How did you guess?"

"I didn't guess. She told me."

"She? Daphne?"

"Yes. She came yesterday for a chat about you—to get a little useful information as to your character and real prospects in life. She wanted to get out of me all that I knew—before she quite decided whether she'd take you or leave you."

"Fernande, do you really mean that she—that she of her own accord discussed it all with you?"

"At length."

He was shaken to his foundations. He felt ashamed as well as angry. The fact that Daphne should come and blurt out the tale of their budding affection, their incipient tenderness, seemed, since it showed her to be without a

shred of delicacy or reticence, monstrous, incredible. Yet it was true.

"I know what you are thinking," said Fernande, looking down at him and speaking very gently. "You feel it was a little undignified of her to anticipate things so boldly and consider them so coolly. But there you are over-critical. Naturally it wasn't what you would have wished. But you really mustn't blame her. She couldn't keep it to herself. It's her poor little hour of imagined triumph. She has been playing for it all along, and now that she thinks she is going to win her game she *has* to tell everybody."

Eric winced, and flushed again.

"Do you mean you think she would tell anybody else than you?"

"Certainly."

"Oh, no. I can't think that. If I thought, well—"

"Why not?" Fernande interrupted him and spoke less gently, with a touch of scorn in her voice. She said that he must not judge people by standards that are high above their heads. Daphne was doing no harm, from the ordinary point of view of such girls, in immediately chattering of her hopes or anticipations. It was merely undignified.

"Undignified," he said. "Yes."

That word struck with penetrating force at his pride. His intercourse with Daphne, or at least its first occasion, the prime cause of any intercourse at all, had been a struggle to recover dignity, to restore his prestige in his own eyes.

"Eric dear, it's no good. It won't do. You really must drop it."

"I don't know that I could if I wanted to. I think I have gone too far."

"You haven't gone too far. You haven't said a word to commit yourself."

"Words aren't everything. If, as you say, she expects it, I can't honourably—"

"She doesn't expect it." Fernande interrupted him again. "That is, she only hopes for it. She thinks it's too good to be true."

"First you say one thing, then you say another. You don't mind what you say. Fernande, you're simply trying to choke me off."

"Yes, I am. I make no pretence. I am trying to choke you off—and I mean to choke you."

"Remember, it was you who brought us together."

"Yes, and now I'm going to push you apart," and her face was full of scorn. "I never suggested *marriage*."

"No," he said warmly, "you suggested something that was quite out of the question."

"Yes, I admit I was wrong as to that. But it makes no difference to the other thing."

He did not reply to this.

"That's right," she said. "Think it over."

Then she lit a cigarette and moved about the room, talking to him with increasing strength. In pauses, or while he spoke to her, she threw back her head and with a large sweep of her arm brought the cigarette to her lips, drew at it, and blew the smoke upward contemptuously.

"It would be a crime, Eric. Not fair to yourself—not even fair to her—not fair to anybody. She'd pull you right down—she would ruin you; and when she had done that, you would hate her. You would hate each other. Because it's the successful man that she sees in you—the man who is going to become enormously rich and give her all that wealth can get for her. If you failed—and you *would* fail—with *her*—then of course she would turn against you. Oh, no, I should never forgive myself if I let you do it. Good heavens, no. Eric, think. Where's your ambition? Where's your knowledge of the world? Where's your common or garden intelligence?"

She smiled now and, finishing her cigarette, came back to him. "You know," she said insinuatingly, wheedlingly, just as indulgent mothers speak to their wilful children, "you don't really care for her. You're not in the least in love with her."

"I should be if I married her. The love would come. And, Fernande, I *am* fond of her."

"Oh, no." Fernande shook her head in gentle reproof. "You may think you are for the moment, but you aren't really. It's just your goodness, your chivalry—your dear sweet Ericness"; and she laughed softly. "Besides—Now you mustn't think me unkind. She doesn't really care for you."

"That's not true. It's just that that's on my mind. She does like me. I'm certain she likes me."

"Likes you! Of course she likes you. You silly boy, everybody likes you. They can't help liking you. But you want a great deal more than that from the woman you'll one day marry. Poor little Daphne's only a silly

empty-headed girl, and it's not her fault if she's incapable of any deep feelings at all. Anyhow, she's incapable of giving you the love—the true abiding love—that you have got to find if you're ever to be really happy. A thousand years with Daphne would leave your heart as hungry, as starving, as it is now. Dismiss all hope in Daphne. Daphne likes you, yes; but she hasn't even begun to be fond of you. I am absolutely sure of what I am saying"; and standing quite close to him she held her head up and squared her shoulders, as if bracing herself for an effort, as if knowing what his next words would be and knowing what they would require from her.

"Why do you say so? How can you possibly be sure?"

"She told me so herself."

"I don't believe it."

"She told me so, with her own lips, here in this room, yesterday."

"I don't believe it."

"You're not very polite—but I'll forgive you. Why should I deceive you? What possible reason can I have for all this interference except to help you—to save you? I swear that I'm trying to do what's best for you yourself. Daphne's not going to have you. I am taking you away from her. But I am not trying to get you back to myself—that is, not back to me in any way except as my true and honest friend"; and, with the effort made, her body relaxed and her face softened. She was speaking now in those deep sweet tones that used to set him thrilling in the past. "*I* should be just as fatal to you as Daphne. I know that only too well. That's why—that's why— No, we'll look ahead and not behind us. But my

feelings toward you haven't changed—I feel all that I ever did. I made you suffer—and I hated doing it. Now I am making you suffer again—a little, Eric. Not nearly so much? Try to understand me, Eric, this time at least. I'm very complex—I'm difficult, horribly difficult, I dare say, for such a dear as you are to understand completely"; and she knelt beside him and held his hands. "Now listen, and look at me. Look right into me. I swear I haven't one selfish thought—not one that I don't justify—where you are concerned. Listen, dear"; and she patted his hands, played with them, giving him the passionless but fond caresses of the mother who defends a necessary course of discipline and implores her child not to blame her for inflicting it. "If you wanted to marry anybody suitable, anybody who could help you on, you wouldn't hear one word against it from me. I should rejoice. I should submit. If Daphne was a girl with a lot of money—or a girl of some big position with lots of powerful relations—then I'd let you risk it with her, silly and trumpery as she is. But she's nothing at all. How *can* I let you commit suicide? For that's what it would be." And she pleaded now for delay. She implored him to postpone making any sort of self-committal, to take time for thought, not to see Daphne again for several weeks or months. Then she got up from her knees and stood with her hand resting on his shoulder. "I dare say you feel it as rather a knock—not a very hard knock—but still a knock. But you'll soon get over it." And she patted his shoulder. "Poor old boy—poor old boy."

She said these last words in exactly the tone that she employed sometimes when consoling or encouraging Cyril.

She went on saying them, as if absent-mindedly, and there was something automatic in the way she continued to pat his shoulder.

"I'll leave you now for a few minutes," she said presently, and she went out of the room.

When she came back she had her quiet businesslike air. She spoke with a brisk confidence, both her tone and manner suggesting that after their long argument all important matters were now settled between them and only a few minor points needed attention. She took it for granted that there would be no trip to Brighton to-morrow, and she advised that he should at once let Daphne know the arrangement was cancelled. He agreed that he did not feel up to the Brighton jaunt or to meeting Daphne at all for a little while, but he thought he would telephone instead of writing a letter. Fernande, however, could not approve of any telephone conversation in this case. Eventually then he sat at Cyril's untidy desk and wrote a note.

"I must get a district messenger to take it," he said forlornly.

"I have sent for one," said Fernande. "I think he is waiting outside now," and she rang the bell for her servant.

After the note had been despatched they sat talking, and insensibly she drew him away from the subject of the recent harassing debate and made him think of other things.

All at once the maidservant brought in a table, put it in front of the fire, and unfolded a white cloth upon it.

"We shall be more comfortable in here," said Fernande,

smiling at him. "Now no excuses or fictitious engagement—" For he protested that he could not stay. "You must feed somewhere, and why not with me?" Then as in the old days he saw her helping the maid to lay the table, busy, concentrated, taking no notice of him. "There," she said, as though reawakening to his presence. "If you want to wash your hands, go into Cyril's room. You know your way."

"Where is Cyril?"

"Ask me an easier one," she said, laughing. "Anyhow he won't come here to disturb us." She was gay, happy, about to enjoy herself thoroughly. "Doubtless Cyril is somewhere with his Hebraic houri—that awful Mrs. Adolph Lynch. She really is awful, Eric. You have never seen her, have you? You're lucky, but I'm surprised that you have escaped. Cyril pushes her down everybody's throat—or tries to."

It was one of Fernande's scratch meals. In spite of the disadvantages of a Saturday night, the experienced maid had foraged successfully. Red wine, cold chicken, thin slices of ham, delicious little twists and rolls of bread —could one ask for more? "Mister is served," said Fernande gaily, and she bowed to him. "Deign to be seated. . . . I'm sure you must be hungry. Mental strain always gives one a ferocious appetite."

She waited on him, jumping up to fetch accessories that she and the maid had put on other tables, on top of the cottage piano, anywhere, stooping over him to fill his glass, wrapping him round with her kindness, her charm, her invincible attractiveness. And Eric, as he submitted, was back on the Surrey hills among the firs and the

heather in the far-off time when just to be with her was sufficient joy, and the hope of continuing to be with her all his hope.

Throughout the evening she was taking him into the past and holding him there. When the table had gone again and she sat on a foot-stool at the corner of the hearth, in the well-remembered attitude, stretching her hands to the warmth, those long yet small hands, made pink and half transparent by the firelight, with her delicate profile outlined for him in light, with her head and neck dark to him, then they were back in the Sloane Street rooms, in the time when he might find her there, unannounced, unexpected, but immeasurably welcome, at any hour that he chanced to come into them.

He was like a person irresistibly slipping back into a delightful but unpermissible habit of which he has with pain and tears laboriously cured himself. And he thought, in effect, that she *was* a habit. He said to himself sadly, "She has spoilt me for anybody else. As soon as one compares other people with her, one feels their deficiencies, their lack of character and individual features, their complete adhesion to everything ordinary and trite. Poor Daphne! It is in truth better for her as well as for me that we should go no further." He felt at this moment that he had never cared for Daphne. When thinking of marrying her he had fallen in love with the notion of marriage itself, not with her. He had merely wanted to fill the immense hole in his life made by the loss of Fernande. But that could not be done.

These hours spent in the circle of her spell had stirred him deeply. The old feelings were quite dead, but mov-

ing in their grave. His thoughts were like ghosts of desire—cold impotent shadows of the once live flame dancing for a moment on the walls of memory.

"Now no changes of mind," she said when he left her. "You have promised me, Eric. . . . One moment." She was scrutinising him just as she used to do, as if inquiring of him and asking herself questions at the same time. "You'll have all to-morrow to get through, without any work or distractions. It may be difficult for you. . . . I suppose you wouldn't care to take *me* out for the day?"

"No," he said, troubled, "I don't think I'll do that, Fernande."

"Then what will you do?"

"I think I shall work. Yes, I shall work all day."

"*That's* right." She smiled, reassured, contented. "If you're working you'll be all right, and I shan't worry about you. Good-night, dear Eric."

About a week later Daphne wrote to Fernande and very earnestly begged her to forget all that had been said over the tea-cups and the cakes. *"It seems that I was altogether on the wrong track,"* wrote Daphne, *"and I feel a bigger ass than ever. I was wrong about a certain person's intentions. He had none. I don't know that I greatly mind. Anyhow I shall never let him know that I mind."*

XIII

FERNANDE had done her work well.

Beyond the disturbance of Eric's mental attitude and the shattering of an immediate plan, she had firmly planted in his mind a distrust that only Daphne herself could ever dispel; and she had nullified this contingency by making him do something which must arouse on the part of Daphne more than distrust, resentment, the smarting of wounded pride. Daphne's distressful little note had not been needed to render it clear that the girl would now infallibly conceal her affection and endeavour to show by every means that she had not been really hurt.

And this was exactly what happened when the two next met. Daphne was pert, casual, very much on the defensive, indeed with but one object in each slangy word, each tone of rather impudent indifference—to prove to him that trips to Brighton, hours of happy confidential chatter, and Mr. Eric Bowen himself, were alike matters of the very slightest importance in her scheme of life.

Yet he went to see her several times more. He felt that he could not allow the episode to end, so to speak, without any ending. He longed to clear up everything frankly and openly, to have an explanation which would put him right with himself and right with Daphne too. He wanted to say to her, "Daphne, you know that for a time I thought you and I would suit each other. Then suddenly I ceased to think so. And now it is very obvious that

you don't think so either. Still, do let us go on being ordinary friends." But Daphne made any explanations impossible.

After its unlucky start in the moonlit garden at Pangbourne the episode had long been a cause of worry and annoyance to him. He had thought that he could only put himself right by winning the girl's friendship, and compelling her, when she saw that she was safe from further affronts, to readjust her opinion of him. He sought Daphne eagerly, and when in her company he acted a kind of gentle courteous aloofness, yet acting also high esteem and respectful regard. He gave her little treats, being absurdly careful to sit as far off as possible in taxicabs or orchestra stalls, to avoid touching her or brushing up against her in crowded places.

It was weary work. But Daphne, treated as a bird or small animal that has been accidentally frightened and is now being wooed to a renewal of confidence, responded very soon to the treatment. She welcomed his attentions, smiled upon him without constraint.

The acting ceased. He liked Daphne's large studio and the young people he met there; he liked the dances, the raggings, the fun; he began to like Daphne herself. He saw sterling qualities in Daphne. All this slanginess, this, if the truth must be faced, bad form, was on the surface; beneath lay much that was very good, very generous. Daphne in different surroundings would of course be different. Success and prosperity, as he thought, are of little use if you have no one with whom to share them. What he wanted, what every sensible man should want, was a wife. Why not Daphne? He was still in doubt

when spinning along that smooth chalk road on the way to the paper mills; he was in doubt all through the month of April; but early in May he began to feel sure that Daphne cared for him, and he made up his mind.

Now he had changed it—completely. Daphne had never really cared for him. He thought that he had been saved from what would truly have been a hideous mistake. But he still felt uneasy, raw. He worried and fretted, wanting to get the thing straightened out properly, wanting to avoid a haunting question as to whether he had not behaved badly at the later stages of the episode as well as at the earlier ones. Also he had one or two nasty qualms. For there were times when Daphne seemed suddenly to unbend a little. She looked at him queerly. So that he thought, feeling the qualm, "Is she fond of me, after all? Was Fernande lying?"

That was why he continued to pay visits to Daphne.

Strangely, almost inexplicably, during this time he was seeing Fernande also. Fernande had taken it for granted that he was now acquiescent to occasional meetings. He did not go to the flat. But once or twice they had tea together at a restaurant, and another time she walked with him in Hyde Park before he went to dress for dinner.

Then it seemed all at once as if fate had decided to bring him and Daphne together again.

He received one of those letters that are able to knock a man off his balance even when he seems to be most secure, that make him leave his work, his play, his whole plan of life, that fill his mind with their message to the

exclusion of all else. He noticed the uncultivated handwriting, then the Widmarsh postmark on the envelope, and as he opened it he had a premonition of trouble.

The letter was from a humble friend of his old cousin.

"I think it right you should know," this good soul wrote, *"that Miss Rawlings is lying ill in our public hospital in the Clarendon Road. It does not seem right she should be in such a place, in her position and so much respected in the town all these years. But it was her own wish and said you were not to know. But I feel you ought to know and come to see her, though she says not on any account. It would be a comfort to her and I am sure she has a lot on her mind."*

Eric was conscience-stricken, fear-stricken. He thought, "She is going to die, and all my life I shall never forgive myself." There rushed into his mind all the memory of her goodness to him, her care of him, her unfailing love, together with an overwhelming remorse for his neglect of her. She was alone, dying, in a public hospital—the friend, the guardian of his youth. This was her reward.

He wrote a hurried note to Carlton House Terrace, saying he could not go there to-day, probably not to-morrow, and that he might be away for a few days.

On arrival at the Widmarsh hospital he was greatly reassured by what the doctor and nurses told him. They said that Miss Rawlings's illness was not in the least dangerous. It was the case of a person who has completely run down, and only needs proper care and nourishment to

be restored to ordinary health. They were astounded and a little amused when he told them that he had arranged for the visit of an eminent London physician during the course of the afternoon. They made no objection to his interference in the matter, but, considering it quite necessary, suggested that he should put off Sir William by telephone. But Eric wanted Sir William, perhaps chiefly because of his eminence and costliness. He had done so little for the poor lady; now he could not do enough.

She was pathetically glad to see him. She vowed that she was nearly well already; that it was too good of him to come; that she was ashamed to have given him all this trouble. As he sat at her bedside talking with her, and hearing these things, his remorse instead of lightening deepened.

The great Sir William confirmed the favourable opinion given by the hospital doctor. After consultation with this gentleman he informed Eric, very solemnly, that there was little if anything the matter with Miss Rawlings. The heart was healthy; he could detect no failure in other organs. For her age, sixty years, our friend was a hale and hearty person. There was not the slightest occasion to take a gloomy view. On the contrary, Eric would be justified in taking a very hopeful one. Sir William trusted that Miss Rawlings would long be spared to him. At the present, of course, she needed care. And he suggested that, on the whole, she would probably now be better in her own home, surrounded with the ordinary comforts of home and in the propitious atmosphere of home. He advised Eric to move her either next day or the day following.

Then, soon, Eric discovered why his cousin had come to the hospital, why she had allowed herself to run down, and what was the nature of that burden on her mind which had been spoken of in the warning letter. When he went to the pleasant little house that was her home, and had been his own, he found in the front garden the boards of agents offering the house to let on lease, and in the windows auctioneers' bills announcing that all the furniture contained in the house was to be sold by auction at a near date. The doors of the house were locked. It was empty. Miss Rawlings' maid and factotum was no longer there.

Eric was busy then for the rest of that day and all of the next. Very gently he extracted from Miss Rawlings a full confession of her troubles—troubles that now, as once before, she had kept from him so carefully. In maintaining him she had depleted her small capital much more than he had known. When he left her, she was almost at the end of her resources, and even with the money he had sent, her means were quite insufficient. In her difficulty she had committed the indiscretion that some elderly spinster ladies seem incapable of avoiding. Hoping for impossible things, ignoring that wise maxim about high interest and poor security, she had risked nearly all that remained of her capital in a rash investment and had lost it. Hence the lack of proper nourishment, the running down, the hospital. Eric's heart ached again.

By the afternoon of the next day, however, those dismal standard trees, the agents' boards, had been removed from the garden, the menacing bills of the auctioneer had disappeared from newly washed windows. The old serv-

ant was inside the house scrubbing and cleaning and making things ready for the return of her mistress. Miss Rawlings would be home again on the morrow.

Eric went back to London. The matron at the hospital had advised him very strongly that when he came back next day for the removal of his relative, he should bring with him some sensible woman friend. The matron thought that the assistance of a kindly sympathetic woman would be invaluable, not so much for the brief journey between the hospital and the house, but for settling the patient comfortably, and superintending the servant's efforts during the first few hours or so.

Eric now was to find among his friends this assistant lady. He had only one female friend—Fernande—and he went straight to Chelsea to tell her of his need. She was not at home. She had gone away for a few days. It was a cruel disappointment; and yet he knew that, although Fernande would have consented joyfully to his request, she was not really the right person for such a purpose. She would have thought of him rather than of his cousin. All the time she would have been wanting to save him trouble—to push the thing through and be done with it, so that he might go on with his ordinary life. But, except for Fernande, there was no one to whom he could appeal—literally no one.

Then he thought of Daphne.

Daphne, if she could, would come to his aid; yet it seemed impossible to ask her. But there was no one else.

Daphne lived near the Regent's Park, a long way from Chelsea. It was getting dark as his cab turned into the quiet road, and he thought, "She will have finished work-

ing, she will have gone out, I shall miss her." Then just as the cab stopped he saw the door of the house open, and Daphne came down the steps in her hat and scarf. Chance had been kind to him.

"Hullo, Eric," she said, without cordiality. "Does this mean that you were about to honour me with a ceremonious call?"

"Daphne—yes—I wanted to see you."

"That's unfortunate," said Daphne coldly, "because I am afraid—"

"Could you spare me a few minutes? May I walk a little way with you? The fact is, I had screwed up my courage to ask you a great favour."

"How very exciting," said Daphne, more coldly still.

"Daphne, I am rather in distress about something—and I thought perhaps you might be willing to help me."

Daphne's manner changed instantly.

"Oh, Eric, tell me about it. Help! Of course I will. Come inside."

"But I mustn't hinder you. You were going somewhere."

"That doesn't matter twopence. Come on."

She led him back to the house, took him into the studio, and sat with him there listening to his tale. She was another Daphne, a Daphne that he had never seen before, so quiet and serious, so intent, so full of ready and active sympathy. "Poor old dear," she said, in reference to Miss Rawlings, and she kept on saying it. "Yes, yes, poor old dear. I understand. . . . Yes, if you didn't want the people down there to know about her circumstances, you are quite right not to bring in any of her

local friends—especially as you say she's so reserved, poor old dear. Much better to get somebody fresh. I'm so glad you came to me. I see how upset you must have been yourself. But it's splendid to know that everything is going to be all right. Now just tell me about the trains."

"Daphne, will you really?"

"Of course I will."

"It's most awfully good of you. You know, it'll take most of the day. A day wasted—your painting!"

"The day won't be wasted—and hang my painting."

Next day she went with him to Widmarsh, and her kindness, her usefulness, surpassed belief. She was sweet to the invalid, at once gaining her confidence and soon altogether winning her heart. She stayed at the house many hours; she helped the servant; quietly and unobtrusively she took charge of everything, she did everything.

"That's a nice girl," said Miss Rawlings, comfortably installed in her room upstairs, with Daphne busy down below in the kitchen preparing the invalid's tea. "That's a really nice girl, Eric. Oh, how different from the fast modern girls that one reads about in the papers."

Daphne, fair-haired, quiet, demure, but competent, and indeed looking as if she had never uttered a slangy word or moved faster than she was moving now, came into the room soon with the tea-tray most beautifully arranged, and waited on Miss Rawlings until the light repast was finished.

They returned to London late that evening, and Eric again sat with her for a little while in the studio. Daphne

was even more sympathetic than before, happy, glowing with satisfaction after the good day's work. Eric, when he had exhausted all his thanks for her great kindness, was moved to speak to her very freely of his own affairs, confiding to her the thoughts and feelings that had been aroused in him during these last three days. He said that the illness of his cousin seemed to have come upon him as a sudden turning-point in life. He felt it as a sort of new awakening.

"It is as though scales had fallen from my eyes, Daphne. I feel that till now I have been so horribly selfish and egotistical. Really I have thought only of myself. I have made myself the centre of the universe."

"Don't all successful men do that?" said Daphne. "I think they have to."

"No, they don't," he said eagerly. "Mr. Cornish doesn't. In working for himself he was always working for others—first his old mother, then his wife and children. But I have been always for myself. And I see now that no work that is all for oneself can ever be really good. . . . I thought only of myself with *you*, Daphne."

But at this Daphne made a grimace. She frowned, and it was as if a dark cloud descended on her, blotting out all the brightness and glow.

"Oh, please leave me out of it," she said coldly. "Really I don't know why you should drag *me* in"; and she gave a harsh little laugh, and jumped up from the artist's couch on which they were sitting.

For a moment they had seemed to have drawn very near together. Now they were wide apart again.

XIV

Once again his thoughts had been given a new direction. Those feelings that he had spoken of did not fade. The sense of having been awakened to a better understanding of self and its relation to the external world remained with him, not weakening, but growing stronger; and from the strength of it he himself seemed to gather strength. His views of a sudden had widened enormously; his sympathies had become keener as well as quicker in their response to anything that stirred them. One must work for others, he thought, and the work must be useful to the world at large. That was the strength of men like Cornish. Not their amassed wealth, but the solid useful things that they had done in amassing it, gave them their weight and consequence.

But he had something further to do for Miss Rawlings, in order at once to provide for her future and redeem his own shortcomings in the past. He transacted this piece of business promptly. Gathering together the total amount of what Mr. Cornish had called his working capital, which proved to be considerably more than he had reckoned, he employed the whole of it in purchasing an annuity for Miss Rawlings. Now she would be safe whatever happened to him.

He was surprised by the quiet happiness, the peace of mind, that the completion of this arrangement gave to him. He hugged the thought of it. Naturally it was

something about which he did not want to talk to anybody. He held it as one of those rare and precious secrets that do good to oneself and cannot harm, benefit, or interest the rest of the world.

He did not foresee that he might be obliged to let his employer share the secret, and he was therefore not prepared when Mr. Cornish abruptly attacked it. He tried still to defend it.

"Now, Eric," said Cornish jovially, and rubbing his hands together in the pleasant anticipation of giving pleasure, "I think I can put my finger on a rapidly improving investment. How much money have you got available?"

Eric said with embarrassment that he had no money available.

"What d'you mean? Where's your working capital? You told me only a fortnight ago that you had about six thousand pounds."

Eric replied that he had now parted with this. There was nothing left.

"Parted with it? Nothing left!" Cornish looked crestfallen and annoyed. "D'you mean you've invested it on your own? Without waiting for my advice?"

Eric said that he had in a manner invested it. It was his no longer.

"Oh," said Cornish, becoming stiff and curt, "and you don't want to give me any particulars?"

Eric said that it was, in fact, rather a private matter.

"Oh, very good," said Cornish. "That will do. I won't say another word."

It has often been remarked that when people promise

not to say another word they almost invariably say a good many more words. Not necessarily at once, but before very long. So to speak, they pause and take breath, and then begin again with renewed energy. This is as true of quarrelling and love-making as it is of parliamentary debate or business discussion. Mr. Cornish began again next day.

"Bowen, if you'll be good enough to bear with me, I have to speak to you seriously." His manner was very firm, very quiet, rather stern. In the customary blue suit and blue collar, with his face becoming a little redder than usual as he went on, he looked now rather like a sea captain calling to order a young second mate, or even a cabin boy. It was in Eric's work-room, and they were alone. "I think I must demand an explanation of what you told me yesterday. Putting two and two together, I think I am not very far from explaining it myself. I think you've been playing the fool." And he held up his hand to prevent Eric from interrupting him. "Hear me out, please. I should have been glad if you had confided in me yesterday—if you had considered it a right and proper thing to take me into your confidence. I don't know why you didn't. I think you might have. . . . Now, I'm more than old enough to be your father, and I know the world. I know that when a young man situated like you, here in London, has six thousand pounds one day, and ten days or a fortnight later hasn't a bob that he can put his hand on, there are only three things to account for the state of affairs—and they are: Number one, gambling of some kind or another; Number two, women; Number three, blackmail. That won't do for my prototype, and, to be frank,

it won't do for me either." And again refusing to be interrupted he said, if not explicitly, with a sufficiently complete implication, that he could not employ anybody in so confidential a position as Eric's when he himself was losing confidence.

Then, of course, Eric said exactly what he had done with his money.

Mr. Cornish brought out a seafaring coloured handkerchief, blew his nose loudly, went to one of the windows and looked out on that pleasant view of St. James's Park.

"I'm touched by this," he said gruffly, still looking at the view. "You're a good lad, Eric." Then he came from the window. "Shake hands. I beg your pardon. What you've done, now I know what it was, doesn't surprise me. I am satisfied. On the whole I think you have acted rightly. Now not another word."

And this time there was not another.

It was soon after this that Eric found himself completely drawn into the family life of the house. Against his own wishes he submitted to being thus absorbed or enrolled, and those new resolutions of his made it easier to submit. If Cornish wanted his company, he must have it. If he could be useful in this way, or any other way, he must be glad to be used. The beginning of it occurred one evening before dinner. Cornish was finishing some letters with Miss Rivers-Paine, the private secretary. Eric had been helping them with memoranda.

"Miss Paine," Cornish asked, "have I any engagement to-night?"

Miss Paine said that he was going to a City dinner—Saltmongers Company,—but he was not going to speak at it.

"Not down for a speech—good! Where's Miss Ruth?"

"Shall I see if I can find her?" said Miss Paine, rising from her chair and moving towards the door without waiting for further commands.

"Ruth, my dear," said Cornish, when his daughter presented herself, "what are you doing to-night?"

Miss Ruth said she was going to an evening party with Lady Emily.

"Is it important? Is it likely to be amusing?" said Cornish. "Look here, Ruth—would you care to chuck it and come with me to the Old Vic and see *The Merchant of Venice?*"

Miss Ruth said she would like this very much.

"Capital!" said Cornish, rubbing his hands together. "And we'll take Eric with us. Eric, you must come too. An evening with Shakespeare will do you all the good in the world. Come on—just as we are. Get your hat, Ruth. I'll give you a bit of dinner at an out-of-the-way place that I used to patronize thirty years ago."

Then on another evening, Mrs. Headingley, the attractive and fashionable Jane, came into Eric's room and said, with a well practised charm of manner, "Mr. Bowen, do you think you could take pity on two deserted females, and come to their rescue? Our cavalier has failed us in a shocking and disgraceful way."

Eric, turning himself into a rescue-party, escorted Mrs. Headingley and Miss Cornish to the opera, and thence to a well-known dancing club, where Mrs. Headingley be-

came so much involved with large numbers of her fashionable friends that she refused to leave when her sister was already tired of the entertainment. "Send the car back for me, Ruth," she said gaily. "I shan't come home till daylight."

As Eric walked with Ruth a little way down Bond Street in search of their car, he observed for the first time her peculiar calmness. It seemed like a personal attribute. She was the same in all places. Sitting amidst the noise and smoke of that strange Fleet Street restaurant, listening to the crashing orchestra at the opera, coming down the staircase at home in the early morning, or walking along the pavement here in the middle of the night, she had her little air of sedate purpose, quiet acceptance of facts, with a reserve that was not pride, a simplicity that was not caused by lack of intelligence. Eric thought, "She has great natural dignity."

Then, with little delay, Cornish invited him to live altogether at Carlton House Terrace. A room had recently been vacated on the top floor, where all sorts of people not belonging to the family seemed to find shelter temporarily or permanently. Cornish said that Eric would be entirely his own master there, to go out and come in as he liked, to join the family at meals or not, as it suited him. Cornish thought that this would be very convenient for Eric as well as for himself.

Miss Ruth, as Eric had been informed, nourished an affection for her father, and had a lot of courage.

She also played the violin. And because of this accomplishment the courage and the filial regard were put to a severe test one night in Eric's presence. With the unexpectedness of a shell fired in peace time, her father begged her to give him a tune. It was in the middle of a very small but very smart musical party that the Cornishes were giving with the assistance of Lady Emily Gale. Lady Emily had assembled some of what she called the best people, and had certainly provided what might be termed some of the very best music. It was as good as it was expensive. A Russian quartette, singing without accompaniment, had wailed and sobbed in a most thrilling manner; a famous soprano had been throwing pearls of melody to a great height; an equally famous contralto had rolled out vibrations of deep sound that were like curtains of velvet, the architecture of dreams, or the feastings of gods in sacred groves; a venerable Polish gentleman with a 'cello had also obliged. Then Mr. Cornish, contented, beaming, glad to see everybody happy, called upon his beloved Cordelia to do a turn. Ruth, appalled, made negative movements with her head, went to him hurriedly and implored him to desist, saying, as she always said, that she really couldn't play the violin at all, not before anybody, much less before such an audience as this.

"Oh, nonsense, don't be shy, my dear," said Cornish. "Come on. I want you to. Fetch your instrument."

Then Ruth played to them—and Eric watched her and admired her for her courage. She looked up with that apparently shortsighted glance that seemed to see no-

body, then settled her firm round chin on the pad, raised her arm with the bow, and to the accompanying notes of the piano struck into the opening passages of a nocturne by Chopin.

Ruth was of the middle height, built solidly rather than slenderly. She had brown hair. Her white bare arms were round and firm. Her dignity did not desert her; even under this trial she appeared to be self-possessed, calm; on the whole a good-looking, if not very attractive girl. When she stopped playing there was rapturous applause for the daughter of the house. Ruth smiled gravely in acknowledgment of this courtesy, put her violin in its case, and presently, carrying it out of the room, stopped to speak to Eric.

"Was it very awful?" she asked in a low, breathless voice. "Were they laughing at me? Did you hear what they were saying?" She was trembling from head to feet, she was like a person who has been running for her life, and Eric saw the faint colour coming and going in her white cheeks like a light that is flickering and being blown out inside a lamp with a paper shade. She was utterly exhausted.

"Let me carry that for you," said Eric.

"No," she murmured, "I am taking it upstairs."

She did not come down again for more than twenty minutes, and then she was very pale, but sedate and calm as ever.

Eric thought of what her father had said. "That's a good girl." At any rate she had proved that she did not consult her own feelings when it was a question of giving pleasure to Mr. Cornish.

Eric had retained his rooms in Sloane Street, but was now living altogether in Carlton House Terrace for the season—"If indeed one can call it the season nowadays, my dear Mr. Bowen," said Lady Emily Gale. "Oh, that war! How much it still has to answer for."

Lady Emily called him her dear Mr. Bowen, and treated him with a politeness that increased as her distaste grew more intense. She was very hostile to this intruder that had been unceremoniously thrust into what she considered to be altogether her own department of affairs.

Hitherto when Miss Cornish or her sister had required a male escort, it was she who had provided it. This was a valuable piece of patronage now removed from her hands. She disapproved most highly of Eric being taken about, or taking the ladies about, instead of her nominees. Moreover, the now ubiquitous young man interfered with very special plans. He got in her way—perhaps unconsciously, but very irritatingly. That was what annoyed her most of all. He got in her way. Eric, although quite unaware of many waves of discomfort in the atmosphere surrounding him, was not so innocent as to fail in detecting Lady Emily's main purpose. Lady Emily had a candidate for that great prize which seemed to be offered in the as yet unfettered person of the daughter of the house—her dear, her very dear, Ruth. He was Lord Alderstown, a man of about thirty-five, with a good record and a distinguished aspect, solemn of speech, retiring of manner. From all that one heard, he was an exemplary nobleman with only one fault—he was very poor. That, however, was a fault which Mr. Cornish

would remedy. Ruth Cornish was gracious to him, but kept him at a respectful distance, which he himself showed no vulgar desire to break through. He was waiting for a signal to step forward, and he disregarded any pushes from behind that were given to him by his kind solicitous aunt, Lady Emily.

Good season or bad, Lady Emily was very busy organising gaieties for her patrons. She arranged dances and dinners as well as musical parties. But the small concerts were much grander than anything else—the biggest musical stars to perform, a magnificent supper at round tables in the ground-floor rooms, guests saying things which gladdened Lady Emily's heart, as, for instance, that this was one of the few houses where things were done on a pre-war scale. Very smart people came—duchesses, an ambassador or two, cabinet ministers, great officials. One night there was a royal princess.

Eric was downstairs in the hall when the princess departed. She came down the stairs with Cornish and Ruth, a kind friendly creature, thanking her host and hostess fervently for the happiness of her evening.

When Cornish returned from the porch he told Eric to take Ruth and get her some supper; and presently he came to them, sitting alone together at one of the remoter tables, and talked to Ruth with overflowing contentment.

"Ruth, my dear, I call it a tiptop affair to-night, and no mistake. Her Royal Highness seemed really satisfied. She thanked me again and again outside. She stopped the car to thank me." And he strolled away, rubbing his hands and nodding his head.

When he had gone, Ruth spoke with a seriousness that was unusual, even for her.

"Father's only pleased for *us*, of course. No doubt people say we are very snobbish. But father isn't a snob."

"Oh, I know that," said Eric eagerly.

"Yes," she said, in the same tone, "I think you understand him better than almost anybody. That is why you get on so well together."

Eric said something, and she did not seem to listen.

"I think," she said, "people are always rather unkind to self-made men. They are so ready to make that accusation of snobbishness. They don't understand. They don't put themselves in the place of a man like father and try to see his point of view. Society is the last thing left for such men to conquer. They've conquered everything else, and they want to get the better of that too. Well, isn't that natural? But with father it isn't for himself. It's just *us*. He has given us big houses, expensive frocks, everything grand, and he wants to give us grand people to consort with. It doesn't give *me* any pleasure, of course. I hate it. But I couldn't let father know that, could I?"

They sat there talking, and Eric had an impression that in bringing herself to speak so freely to him of her father she had melted her habitual reserve. And it was as if she felt glad that it had melted. She talked of other things now with a similar freedom. Yes, the reserve seemed to have gone, but not the gravity of tone. He noticed the evenness of her voice, the measured emphasis in each sentence, as of a person who never has

spoken and does not ever intend to speak without first quietly thinking what she is going to say. She made unembarrassed pauses too, pauses of calm reflection. Then, after one of these pauses, she said something that startled him, almost made him jump, although it was said exactly as everything else had been said, its few firm words carefully measured.

"Oh, damn this woman," said Miss Cornish.

And she answered Eric's look of surprise with a smile and a repetition of her words in a firm whisper. "Damn this woman."

Lady Emily Gale had caught sight of them from the doorway of the room and was bustling towards their table.

"My dear Ruth, I have been looking for you everywhere. I thought you must have had a headache and gone to bed"; and Lady Emily reported how Lord Alderstown had also been looking for her until at last he went away in despair, with all his thanks and compliments unspoken. "He charged me with every sort of message," said Lady Emily. "I believe he wants to inveigle you into playing a game of golf with him at Ranelagh some morning next week. You ought to, dear—if you can spare the time. The air is so fresh, it is all so pleasant down there—especially in the morning."

Eric had risen to his feet, Miss Cornish rose too, and they did not sit down again when Lady Emily left them.

"Good-night, my dear Ruth," said Lady Emily. "I must hurry homeward, or I shall be a mere limp rag tomorrow—and I have *so* much to do. Good-night, Mr. Bowen."

She could not bring herself to call him her dear Mr. Bowen to-night. He had got in the way too stupidly.

From this time Eric found that his intercourse with Miss Cornish was on a much easier footing. The social duties that he had to fulfil with her became less irksome. She possessed a sense of humour, and was extraordinarily observant; now that she was willing to talk unreservedly they were never at a loss as to what to talk about.

Notwithstanding all these festivals and elegant futilities of social life, the work of the house went on without interruption. Business still retained its rank very far in advance of pleasure, and Mr. Cornish made short work of Eric's invitations or engagements when he wanted his service on more important matters. Thus at the height of Lady Emily's brilliant season he sent Eric on a confidential mission to Stockholm, Dantzig, and Warsaw.

When Eric returned three weeks later, Miss Cornish welcomed him with a very friendly smile and said, "It is nice to see you again, Mr. Bowen." Her greeting gave him a glow of pleasure; it made him feel as if he was really coming home, and not merely returning to his place of employment. He saw now very plainly that, no matter how quiet and unobtrusive she seemed, Ruth was the presiding spirit of the house. She took care of people, she wanted them to be happy; more delicately, but no less firmly than her father, she tried to make them happy.

Moreover, as Eric began to understand, she governed as well as presided. It was she who in fact decided when her two elder sisters were to come and when to go, how long their children were to remain in London and how soon they would require sea air or country amusements.

Everybody in the house was really subject to her quiet rule. She allowed her father unlimited license because her love for him was so great that she could not admit he ever did anything that was not wise and correct. But the rest of them all had to do what on reflection she considered best for them. If any one of them rebelled she would give him a second, perhaps even a third, chance of obedience; but if he obstinately refused to take his chance, she would suppress him altogether. Not for nothing had she called Lady Emily Gale a damned woman. It was obvious to Eric that during his absence something had happened to her ladyship of a nature to take all the fussiness and assumption out of her. She was subdued, comparatively diffident. He surmised that, in the language of the servants' hall, Ruth had given her a talking to and put her in her place.

He admired Ruth's strength of character. He admired it more and more.

XV

A GREAT many weeks, so many that he could not count them, had gone by since he last saw Fernande. On that last occasion she had been different again, wistful and gently feminine, instead of careless and manlike; and she had said, too, in a way that touched his heart, "You would never drop me now, would you, Eric?"

Indeed he had no intention of dropping her. That saying, "Out of sight is out of mind," should never again be allowed to become applicable to his method of dealing with old friends. He had had one lesson, and he did not want another.

He took the first available opportunity of going to Chelsea.

As he drove along the Embankment in the warm afternoon sunshine, he was thinking of her very deeply.

"What would she be to-day? Merry or sad? Grand or humble? What would she look like?"

Then he thought of Ruth Cornish. Miss Cornish never surprised one; she was always the same. The moment one thought of her one could mentally see her, as she was yesterday and the day before, as she would be to-morrow and the day after. Except for the merest trifles, certain individual details not immediately noticed, she was exactly the same person that she had been at his first sight of her. He now considered her very good-looking; but he would have thought so then if he had studied her more closely.

He knew that her brown hair was not so dark as he had supposed it to be, that it had reddish strands and almost golden strands in it; he knew also that the pretty flicker of colour in her face, far from being rare, was frequent, and that it seemed to be caused as much by passing thoughts as by any little physical effort; but these items of his knowledge all added together made no real difference in her.

Perhaps it was the steadfastness of her character that gave this unchanging fixity of outward appearance.

When he arrived at Chelsea, it was as if fate was playing him a cruel and absurd trick. He had a surprise, as seemed inevitable in all dealings with Fernande, but she herself did not give it to him. Fernande was not there. Fernande had gone. A card at the entrance of the building announced that there was an unfurnished flat to let on the fourth floor and requested applicants to go to the porter at Number Six for particulars.

There was a similar card on the door upstairs. He stood there, in that peculiar and almost frightening silence of the empty living-place which one has known always with life in it, a silence broken after a time by tiny whispering sounds, as if the uncarpeted boards, the fireless hearths, the blank unused space, had found a voice and were telling him of their abandonment and desolation. The glass panels of the locked door had already become darkened with dust; sticking out from the letter box, there were two or three morning newspapers of a month ago; some tradesmen's circulars lay at his feet where they had been tossed down by a careless messenger. He had the same feeling of personal humiliation as when he saw

those boards of the auctioneers outside his cousin's deserted house. Here again were the evidences of a disaster that he ought somehow to have foreseen, somehow to have averted. Fernande loved this flat; it was more than a shelter; it was a part of herself.

The porter at Number Six did not know where Mr. and Mrs. Faulkner had gone. He did not think they had left their address with anybody. But the new tenancy, he said, was nothing to do with them; the flat was now "in hand," and one could negotiate direct with the landlord. The porter had the key. He offered to go back with Eric and show him over.

Fernande had disappeared. Since he could not find her without aid he determined to find Cyril; and for an hour or two he went from place to place looking for him. Cyril must tell him exactly what had happened. But Cyril was not at his club, not at any of his old haunts.

Then, when despairing, Eric had a thought that should have come to him before his vain search instead of after it. The way to find Cyril was to find Cyril's wealthy patroness, Mrs. Adolph Lynch. He rang up the lady's house in Lancaster Gate.

A comfortable mellow voice answered him. Mrs. Adolph Lynch herself had come to the telephone. She said that she was expecting Mr. Faulkner to dinner to-morrow, but he was not there to-night, and she asked to know who was speaking to her. On hearing that it was Mr. Bowen she became extremely cordial, her voice swelling to its ripest tones. Mr. Bowen, she declared, had long been known to her by reputation as one of Cyril's "bosom pals"; she desired his acquaintance; and now, with this

good beginning on the telephone, they really must "meet in the flesh," as she expressed it. "Tell Cyril to bring you some night soon. He knows he may bring any one he pleases."

Thus encouraged, Eric asked some guarded questions about Cyril's affairs, and was much relieved to learn that nothing very unusual seemed to have occurred. Evidently Cyril had not interrupted his gallant attendance on the hospitable lady. Moreover she had seen Mrs. Faulkner, too, and quite lately. Say, about ten days ago. Yes, she had had a little theatre party—herself and Cyril, Mrs. Faulkner and that delightful old man, Mr. Letronne, the famous art critic. Finally she said that Mrs. Faulkner was staying at one of the Knightsbridge hotels, but she was not sure which. Cyril, as she knew positively, had put up at the Métropole Hotel, and would remain there until his wife had finished house-hunting.

Eric thanked her, bade her good-night, and hung up the receiver, little guessing that his brief conversation with Mrs. Lynch would ever prove of the slightest importance to him; much less that it could be the first of a long series of events that, as they approached their end, might cost him very dear.

"Mrs. Faulkner, yes, sir," said the hall porter at the second of the Knightsbridge Hotels that Eric visited. "Mrs. Faulkner has just come in."

The page-boy glanced into a rather dismal reading-room adjacent to the entrance hall, and then led him to her. She was seated at the big central table, where two other guests of the hotel, a large bald-headed man and a

thin elderly woman, were studying as if with avid interest the dreadful sort of newspapers that one sees only in such places. Her attitude seemed to show listlessness and fatigue. She was in morning dress, and a hand-bag that he had given her as a present a long time ago lay beside her gloves on the table.

Her pleasure at seeing him was very evident.

"Eric! But this is wonderful. How did you know I was staying here?"

He told her of the anxious hunt that had followed his surprise in Chelsea.

They spoke in low voices; but the bald man coughed reprovingly and the thin lady rustled the leaves of her journal as if in discomfort.

"Is there any other room," Eric whispered, "where we could be alone?"

"No, I am afraid there isn't. This place is very small. I only came here because it's cheap."

Presently the big man put down his paper with a sigh. Then after taking out his watch and carefully winding it, he said something to the old lady. Then they both left the room, and Eric and Fernande were able to talk without restraint.

"Why didn't you let me know you were giving up the flat?"

"Would it have been of any interest to you, Eric?" and she raised her eyes and looked at him.

He reproached her for saying this, and told her gently that it was unkind of her to leave him in ignorance about anything that concerned her.

"Well, then, I didn't want to bother you," and she had

a very sad little smile. "I intended to write and tell you when I was settled somewhere else."

Again he reproached her.

"Eric, it's nice of you to seem to mind, but of course you can't mind really. Not now."

"Fernande, why do you speak like this? I mind dreadfully. And what do you mean by 'Not now'?"

She was still looking at him.

"I mean," she said, "now that your time is altogether mortgaged."

"Yes, I'm always busy, but—"

"But you are infinitely more busy now than you were a little while ago, aren't you?"

"No. It's always pretty much the same. I was away for three weeks."

"Ah! And now you are back, you are making up for lost time," she said, as if there was a significance in her words that he would understand. "I don't blame you. In the circumstances Fernande naturally becomes very much of a back number. . . . Eric, I have said I don't blame you."

"But I don't know what you are talking about."

"My dear, there are little birds in London just as there are in the country—little chattering birds on the cornices of houses, on the chimney pots, and on the window sills—and the little birds tell me things when other people won't."

He did not in the least understand all these words of hers. For a moment or two they were looking into each other's face, she with an intent questioning gaze, and he merely seeming puzzled and wondering. Then she low-

ered her eyes and began to play with the hand-bag, stroking it and flattening it, as they went on talking.

"I haven't an idea what the little birds said, Fernande; but if they said anything to make you think I shouldn't be upset and anxious because of any trouble of yours, then they are little liars as well as little birds."

"Dear Eric," she said softly.

"Won't you say what's in your thoughts, Fernande?"

"Yes, I will. It's only this," and with her open hand she pressed upon the bag. "I was led to suppose that you might have quite a big bit of news to tell me about yourself and your future plans. That is, if you cared to tell it."

He was still completely puzzled. He assured her that nothing remarkable had happened to him or was likely to happen, so far as he knew.

"All right. Thank you, Eric. . . . Dare I ask you to make one promise?" and she looked up at him and then again her eyes dropped. "Suppose something does happen—I mean something that will alter your life,—will you tell me then?"

"Of course I would."

"Tell me at once—and not leave me to find out for myself?"

"Of course not."

"Is that a promise?"

"Yes, that's a promise."

"Thank you. Bless you." She drew her chair close to his, so that their elbows touched. "Now about me. It's quite all right. You're a perfect angel to worry, but you're not to. I have pulled through worse scrapes than this."

"But what is the scrape? Cyril?"

"No, both of us."

"Do you mean you have left him?"

"Temporarily—at any rate. But no doubt we shall come together again. We always do. I may as well confess I have been behaving badly as well as Cyril. My dear, your Fernande has been very naughty. Gambling! Yes, I know. I ought to be well smacked." Her face was bright again. She talked faster, she rattled on gaily. "I thought I was so dashed clever too—that I was going to make enough to set me up as a respectable citizen for the rest of my days. Phutt! Bang. Down I went." And she laughed. "I was cleaned out, Eric. Yes, I would have you to know it was a real smash. Nothing for it but to sell up everything and fly from the ancestral home. Naturally misfortunes never come singly. I have lost my little job with the bonnet people. The sparkling products of my pen have also ceased to attract. Fernande's means of earning an honest livelihood have been curtailed—in many ways."

She chattered merrily; but when he spoke of helping her with money she grew serious in a moment.

"No, dear," she said in her quiet firm tone. "Not yet —anyhow. I may let you do it some day—but not yet."

It was late now. The modest little hotel betrayed its natural desire to close for the night by such signs as a half darkened hall, occasional appearances of the porter in the reading-room doorway, and a visit of the page-boy for the purpose of tidying the newspapers on the far end of the table. Fernande told her visitor that he had better

go. Then after looking round to see that at the moment they were free from observation by porter or page, she swiftly raised his hand to her lips and kissed it.

"Thank you for taking so much trouble," she said, with a sort of humble gratitude that disturbed him painfully. "It hasn't been wasted. It has made me happy again—for I thought you had forgotten me."

Eric walked home to Carlton House Terrace, and all the way he was thinking of her. He was so sorry, so bitterly sorry for her. He longed to aid her in her difficulties, to protect her from the debasement that, as Cornish had said so tritely, but so wisely, is summed up in that one word poverty; and yet deep in his heart he admired her for still refusing to take help from him. He seemed to understand, more clearly than he had ever done till now, all that was finest in her. She too was brave; very staunch; full of the arts and wiles of a woman, but as resolute and independent really as any man.

Then the memory of that kiss on the knuckles of his hand and the humbleness of her tone suddenly tore at his heart-strings.

Cyril, on the other hand, did not suffer from scruples in regard to being helped, and no later than the following morning Eric was called upon to prove himself the friend in need who is the friend indeed.

Cyril had very imprudently jeopardised his position on the *Mayfair Gazette* by incurring Mr. Cornish's wrath. Mr. Cornish was making a noise about it. Not for a long while had Mr. Cornish used this loud voice and made these

violent gestures as he paced the floor of his library. Miss Paine, fetching Mr. Bowen, said that the chieftain had frightened her by the strength of the outburst.

"Oh, it's you, is it!" said Cornish. "Now look here. What d'you say to this?" And he showed Eric a letter from the printers of the *Gazette,* in which they said that they had been disappointed by not receiving the promised five hundred pounds on account. "I gave Faulkner the money. I gave him the money three weeks ago. Now—what about it?"

Eric pleaded that Cyril was careless and unbusiness-like. It was a mistake which no doubt Cyril could explain and put right.

"Don't talk rot," said Cornish forcibly. "It can be explained in only one way. The man is a rascal. No doubt he has been cheating me all along in a small way, but this is more than I can stand." Then, as Eric continued his pleading, Cornish spoke in a different manner. "Eric, why do you show this compunction for the fellow? You're honest yourself—why do you become the champion of dishonesty? Why haven't you dropped these people? You're not a fool, and you must see as well as I do that this sort of entanglement is worse than foolish, it's dangerous. Frankly—I don't like it."

Eric said that he was not in any way entangled, but that he certainly could not drop Cyril. Cyril was an old friend. "Let me go and see him," he said, "and find out all about it."

Cornish at last consented. "For your sake, Eric, I'll give him one more chance. Tell him," and this was said very sternly, "that I want the printers' receipt for that

five hundred. Tell him that the receipt is to be on my table here by seven o'clock to-night. You can tell him, too, that if anything of the sort occurs again he may take his hat and umbrella and walk out of the office, and that if he leaves anything of his behind him, it will be thrown into the street. There! See him at once, and be done with it."

It was too early in the day for one to expect that Mr. Faulkner would be at the *Gazette* office. In fact it was too early to suppose that Mr. Faulkner would be yet out of bed. Eric went to the Métropole Hotel, sent up a message to Cyril's room, and waited for him till he came down.

For Eric it was a painful interview. Throughout it he was haunted by recollections of Cyril when he had seemed so grand and admirable, the talented editor, the charming man of the world, a personage worthy of hero-worship. He remembered also, very vividly, Cyril's kindness to him—how he himself had stood shyly before Cyril in the editorial chair asking for employment. Cyril had given him the job, not because he believed him to be valuable, but from good-nature, kindness, or pity. These thoughts made him feel like a boy at school who has been sent unwillingly to an elder boy to communicate an ultimatum from the head-master. While disclosing the reason of his visit he did all in his power to save Cyril from humiliation.

But it seemed that he might have spared himself these pains. Whatever were the real feelings of Cyril, he showed no sense of being humiliated. His manner was indeed very lofty and dignified. He spoke of Mr. Cornish

no less disparagingly than Cornish had spoken of him. "My dear boy, your concrete merchant is exciting himself without the slightest cause. It is quite true that the money has not been paid, but it will be paid, of course. I suppose he doesn't imagine I mean to swindle him?" Then, when Eric was compelled to say that he feared Mr. Cornish was supposing something of the kind, Cyril had a superb gesture of contempt and disgust. "What can you expect from a pig but a grunt, Eric? That's the worst of having dealings with these inflated bounders. I always said so—didn't I? And I expect you have a roughish time with the old brute yourself. But you're more adaptable than I am. However"—and he made another gesture, as if dismissing the subject,—"my compliments to Mr. Cornish, and say that the people shall be paid."

"But when will you pay them, Cyril?"

"As soon as it is convenient to me to do so."

Then Eric had to give the ultimatum.

It was impossible for Cyril to comply with its terms. At the moment he was short of the required sum by about two hundred pounds, and he did not quite see where he could lay his hand on this two hundred during the progress of the day. Of course one way out of the difficulty would be for Eric to lend him the money. Eric agreed to do this. He had brought his cheque-book with him.

"Would you care to make it three hundred while you're about it, Eric?"

Eric expressed regret that he could not fall in with this suggestion because he was short of funds. Two hundred pounds would exhaust his capacity. Cyril laughed sar-

donically and gave him a friendly slap on the back as he sat down to write the cheque.

"Well done, Eric. You're catching the millionaire tone already. So many claims to meet—continually increasing expenses—unceasing demands for public charities." But he thanked Eric for the cheque in grateful terms presently, and Eric saw that his fingers were trembling as he put it away in his pocket book.

"You won't let there be any accident, will you?" said Eric earnestly, yet shyly. "The receipt by seven o'clock. It's really serious, you know."

"Damn it, of course I know it's serious," said Cyril, with a sudden lapse from dignity. "There shan't be any accident. And many thanks to you. You shall have your loan back by next Monday at the latest, without fail." And as he said this he was as lofty as ever.

The receipt from the printers duly arrived; and Eric heard nothing more about the matter from Mr. Cornish. He heard nothing more about it from Cyril either. He heard nothing from anybody until a fortnight later, when Mr. Cornish was again making a noise.

It appeared that a person had come to the house and that Mr. Cornish refused to see the person.

"He is shouting for you," said Miss Paine. "Do go to him and pacify him."

"I won't see her," said Mr. Cornish noisily. "It's not a bit of good. Get rid of her, Eric, as quick as you can. She's no business here at all."

"But who is it?" asked Eric.

"Mrs. Faulkner—that man's wife." And to Eric's consternation he explained that he had dismissed Cyril from

the *Gazette*. "I haven't had time to tell you"; and he held up his hand as a warning against interruption. "I sacked him yesterday afternoon. I fired him out neck and crop. He's a rascal and a cheat. Now, of course, the wife has come to beg me to take him back. I won't do it. D'you understand? Not you nor anybody else will alter my decision. It's final. Now tell her so. Get her out of the place."

She was sitting in the hall. They had left her there as though she had been a messenger from a dressmaker, a servant come to apply for a situation, or a decently dressed mendicant. The man in charge of the door no doubt was keeping an eye on her lest she should attempt to intrude further into the privacy of the house. Eric felt chivalrously indignant that she had suffered such treatment. With an air of exaggerated deference, assumed for the instruction of the watchful man, he led her into his own room and talked with her there.

It was not Cyril who had sent her. She had come of her own accord to implore consideration from Mr. Cornish. Cyril, she said, was bitterly wounded. He had been dismissed with less courtesy than would have been shown to one of Mr. Cornish's footmen. Cyril was quite "broken up" by it. Could not Eric do something to mollify Mr. Cornish?

Eric was obliged to tell her that, so far as Mr. Cornish was concerned, it was all over with Cyril. From his knowledge of Cornish he was sure that this was the end.

She made a forlorn gesture.

"Very well, Eric. We must grin and bear it. But it's

the worst knock we have had—because it means that Cyril will now be quite adrift. So long as he had the *Gazette*, he did try. Now I'm afraid he'll give up trying."

They went out into the hall together. The front doors were wide open. Miss Cornish's car stood waiting in the bright sunlight, behind it the foliage of trees and the high walls of one of the club-houses in Pall Mall. A footman carried a dust cloth through the porch and gave it to the chauffeur. Another footman was brushing Mr. Cornish's white top hat. Lady Emily Gale and two grandly dressed women could be seen half way up the stairs, where they had paused to talk to somebody on the landing above them. Everything seemed to speak of ease, wealth, splendour; and again Eric had the poignant sensation of Fernande's humbleness and unimportance in the midst of it all. She was being ejected as an undesirable intruder. Forlorn, unhappy, she was spurned by master, servants, and the whole house. Eric could not allow her to go away from its doors in this manner.

"Wait a moment, Fernande. I'll walk with you;" and he fetched his hat.

They went away together then, along Pall Mall and up St. James's Street. At the top of the street they were overtaken and passed by Miss Cornish in her open car. Her father was beside her. He stiffly raised his hat, bowed to Fernande, and stared at Eric. Miss Cornish turned her head, saw them, and looked away again; but while her glance was on them Fernande took Eric's arm and held it tightly. She held it until the car disappeared.

Fernande was leading him to the shelter she had now

found for herself, and she assured him that, although he might not think much of it, she was well pleased to have a place of her own again.

"Besides, give me time and I'll make it really nice."

It was in a slanting street much used by taxi-cabs as a short cut between Bond Street and Oxford Street, and it consisted of three rooms at the top of a little old house, of which the ground floor was occupied by a boot-maker's shop. A chiropodist lived on the first floor. It seemed most sordid and miserable, the dark and narrow staircase, the chiropodist's door, the uncarpeted steps of the upper flight; and Fernande's rooms with their low ceilings, dingy little window-panes, and common tawdry furniture, were almost appalling at first.

But she herself, as she had said, appeared to be quite content.

"Such a lucky find, you know. Just what I was looking for. Two bedrooms and a sitting-room."

"Does Cyril come here?"

"Well, he came last night for the first time. I had to let him come because he was so dreadfully down. But I can't have him living here regularly. Really, Eric, the poor old chap is broken-hearted. . . . But now see for yourself."

She had taken off her hat, and she did the honours of her new home, talking the while lightly and gaily.

She showed him, touchingly, small embellishments that she had already made—such as some photographs in silver frames, some prettily bound books, two vases of artificial flowers, a piece of brightly coloured fabric to hide the faded rep of a terrible mid-Victorian sofa. She would

get chintz or cretonne covers for the chairs and hide them too later on. And there should be lovely curtains one of these days.

"Eric—or little by little"; and she laughed. "It shall be Fernande or little by little. Rome wasn't built in a day, my lad. You may defeat Rob Roy, but you can't subdue him. Step this way, please. . . . Now I ask you. Isn't that a duck of a kitchen?"

The kitchen was scarcely bigger than a large cupboard, with a gas stove that filled it, a few pots and pans on one shelf and some crockery on another. Here Fernande did her own cooking. She had no servant. An old woman came for a couple of hours every day to do the household work.

"I'm no end of a cook, Eric. I can cook omelettes and mutton cutlets that I defy the Ritz to improve on. . . . Come one night and let me cook dinner for you."

"Does your old woman get you your breakfast and your early tea?"

"No, you angel, I am gone before she shows her funny old nose. Fernande's early tea and breakfast are all one entertainment, and she prepares it with her own fair hands. . . . Eric, you dear boy, I don't mind a bit. . . . I like it. . . . Imagine me as enjoying a very comfortable breakfast in the most negligent of négligés, then laving my body, tiring my hair, robing myself modestly and becomingly, and then going forth."

"What to do, Fernande?"

"To walk the streets, Eric. Now don't look alarmed." And she laughed in the old happy, mischievous way. "I walk the streets, as many a better man has done before

me, in search of honest employment. I enter emporiums of women's garments, and ask if they happen to want a battered, rather-the-worse-for-wear lady who once was young and beautiful to assist Madam in selling her jumpers, shirts, or dainty lingerie. 'I have the best of references, madam—and none of them forged.' Madam answers acidly or truculently, and if my footsteps tarry she asks me if I do not see the door. Unable to deny that I see her beastly door, I pass out through it, Eric—and try again somewhere else."

Once more he begged her to accept a gift or a loan of money, and once more she refused him with unshaken firmness.

Soon she found work, of a hard and undignified kind, in the millinery department of a common draper's shop. She accepted long hours, meagre pay, and daily fatigue with smiling fortitude. Her power over him now lay in the compassion, the pity, that she always aroused. Disregarding invitations or engagements, he used often to go to those wretched rooms of hers and sit with her of an evening. He could not banish her from his thoughts even during his busiest hours.

For Cyril too he felt an increasing compassion, and he strenuously endeavoured, but without avail, to secure for him some sort of post in the city. He lent him more money, suggesting and hoping that some of it should reach Fernande. Beyond this, he readily complied with one or two bothering requests—as, for instance, consenting to meet men with whom Cyril hatched preposterous schemes, dining at a restaurant with Mrs. Adolph Lynch, and going once to her house in Lancaster Gate.

Sometimes he seemed to have become a confidential intermediary between Cyril and Fernande. They asked him questions about each other, gave him messages to deliver. He was so sorry for them that he would have recoiled from no task that could substantially benefit either of them.

In September he spent three weeks with Mr. and Miss Cornish in Scotland. It was a large house surrounded by wonderful scenery, with wide moors and a glorious river, and, best of all, no large house parties. A few people came, but were soon gone again. There was no Lady Emily. But among the passers-through was her admirable and well-mannered nephew—Lord Alderstown. He came, as it seemed, only for convenience, to put in two nights on his way from somewhere to somewhere else, and he expressed his gratitude in suitable terms for a temporary accommodation. Eric enjoyed it all immensely. He used to go fishing with Cornish nearly every day, and on many days Ruth was with them. The three of them took long expeditions by motor car and walked prodigious distances in the fine stimulating air. In the evening they played Dummy Bridge for halfpenny points. It was homely, simple, very pleasant.

Cornish treated his guest exactly as if he had been a member of the family, and sometimes when they were alone talked to him even more confidentially than is nowadays usual between relatives. He seemed to give his entire thoughts, without hesitation, and yet, nevertheless, there was occasionally something enigmatical that Eric could not quite follow. Thus, one night after dinner, he talked

about his daughter in a way that Eric did not altogether understand. Eric had supposed that his greatest fear was to lose Ruth when she married. Now he spoke almost as it he was reconciled to the notion of her marrying. And yet again, before he had finished talking, the idea seemed to make him irritable and unhappy.

"Eric," he said, beginning, "what's your private opinion of that fellow Alderstown?"

Eric replied that he had formed no very strong opinion, but that Lord Alderstown struck him as an estimable personage.

"Oh, I've nothing to say against him myself," Cornish went on; "but what *I* think doesn't much matter. It isn't *me* that he and his gang are after. Of course they're wanting to get Ruth for him."

"Does Miss Cornish give him any reason to hope?"

Then Cornish spoke with unusual fretfulness, saying, in effect, that girls were unfathomable creatures, even one's own girls. "Alderstown's best chance seems to me that there are no serious competitors in the field just now." Saying this, he rubbed his chin and stared at Eric. "It may be a walk-over for him—in the end—you know." Then after a longish silence he spoke of other matters, but returned to the same theme before they left the dining-room. "I'm not as easy as I used to be about her, Eric. I'd like to see her future clear. Yes, on the whole, I want to see her married. But I want it to be to a man that I like. . . . Come on—or she'll be wondering what we're colloguing about."

On the afternoon of the last day of his visit, Eric had a pleasant walk with Miss Ruth.

She asked him, very kindly, if it need really be his last day. "You know that father would love you to stay on."

But Eric said that for many reasons he was compelled to go.

Then, in the kindest manner, she talked of the arrangements for his journey. She said that, anyhow, it must be an early start, but that she would be down to give him his breakfast, and further than this, she proposed, instead of sending him to the station on the branch line, to drive him in her own car to the junction many miles away. This would make it easier for him, and would be convenient to her, as she wished to make some small purchases in the town.

They walked outward along the banks of the stream, and homeward over the moor. Within sight of the house they sat for a while among some rocks that overhung one of the little rills which fed the river. The sunlight was upon them; the silent spreading lands glowed with soft colour; and Ruth in her simple garments seemed to suit the scene, to harmonise with its quiet charm, its solid yet peaceful strength. She looked smaller, prettier, here, than she did in London, and Eric thought, as he had thought once before, how, when you come to know people and like them, you always see beauty in them, even if it is not there. She told him she was soon going to stay with her grandmother. She said she liked going there—she was fond of her granny. And she gave a very amusing description of the old lady's character and ways. She said that Mrs. Cornish still treated her son as though he were not yet quite grown up, and that she criticised Jane and Agnes very severely. "They have been spoilt, in Gran-

ny's view." And then Ruth spoke very wisely about children, and the management of children, saying that, in fact, her sisters were foolish in this respect.

Eric, smiling and amused, told her that she must practise what she preached when she had children of her own.

Ruth looked at him in surprise. "I hope I shall," she said. "Of course, it's easy to be wise before the event," and she looked at him again. "But why did you say that?"

Eric replied cheerfully to the effect that he expected she would soon be a married woman herself.

"I don't know that I shall ever marry," said Ruth.

"Oh, of course you will."

Ruth looked at him now as though he had hit her. That pretty changing colour disappeared from her face altogether. She seemed to shrink away from him.

"Why have you spoken to me like this?" she said in a low voice.

Eric felt consternation. Somehow, inexplicably, he had put his foot in it—he had offended her or wounded her.

She repeated her question. "Why did you say it?"

"I don't know. Isn't it quite natural? Your father—" and he checked himself. "Well, all your friends want to see you happily married, and I am venturing to class myself among them. Have I ventured too much?"

"Oh, no," said Ruth, "that's all right." She got up from the boulder on which she had been sitting, and led the way down the path by the tumbling water of the rivulet.

All through the evening Eric had an uncomfortable feeling that she resented his too friendly words. When she said "good-night" she made no allusions to to-morrow's

plans; and next morning she did not appear at breakfast. But, as she had promised, she drove him to the far-off railway junction. She talked very little, and, as if in excuse for the scantiness of conversation or divining his feeling of constraint, said that she had a headache.

Bidding her good-bye, he expressed a hope that she would enjoy the visit to old Mrs. Cornish and asked when it was to be.

"I am not going there," she said. "I have changed my mind. I am going abroad."

"Oh, really? With Mr. Cornish?"

"Yes," she said. "He doesn't know it yet," and she smiled for the first time that morning; "but I mean to make him take me to the Italian lakes—and perhaps to Venice. I'm tired of Scotland—and England too. Good-bye, Mr. Bowen."

XVI

This autumn Fernande had an accident, spraining her ankle and wrenching the muscles of a knee, and afterwards was ill with a queer kind of intermittent fever. During her illness Eric did all that was possible for her, and then, acting through Cyril, arranged for her to go to the seaside.

He thought of her after she had gone. The Cornishes were in Italy, his work was at a standstill; nothing of the least importance detained him in London.

One morning he had a portmanteau packed, and before luncheon it was going upward in a luggage lift to the room that he had just engaged at the reception bureau of the big hotel on the Leas at Folkstone. Mrs. Faulkner, he heard, was out in a bath chair. He went along the cliff to look for her.

Her delight at seeing him was so great that he felt quite extraordinarily glad he had come. As he walked beside her chair she told him it was from mere laziness on her part that she still used this invalid's conveyance. Her foot was now all right. She herself felt ever so much better.

"Eric, it's angelic of you to have come. Say you'll be able to stay till an evening train."

"I can stay for a week, if you care to have me for so long."

She did not answer, and when he looked at her ques-

tioningly he saw to his consternation that she was crying. The tears filled her dark eyelashes and ran down her pale cheeks; she bent her head, fumbled for a handkerchief, and then sobbed loudly. It was painful, overwhelming. The chairman had stopped, people were staring at them; Eric, stooping over her, tried to hide her from all these inquisitive eyes.

She recovered herself and apologised humbly for her weakness. After being ill in bed, she said, one had no strength to withstand emotion.

"So—so when you said that you were going to be with me, everything inside me seemed to break with the thought of your goodness. I—I just snapped, Eric. . . . There, that's the end of it. I won't disgrace you again."

Then she said that she must not be selfish. It was too sweet of him to think of giving her his time, but she would not abuse this generosity. He had other people claiming him. If he could stay till to-morrow, that would be enough.

He remained with her, devoting himself to her day after day, and she told him they were the happiest days she had ever spent. He too was happy, thinking that at last he had been able to be of some slight use to her. They strolled about, she leaning on his arm, not really needing support, but because it gave her pleasure, as she told him; they sat on seats in the paths below the cliffs; they talked to no one except each other. The crowds, the noisy hotel, the movements, voices, aspect of the people all round them, had no effect on them. They seemed to be alone.

She was gay now, full of vivacity, amusing him with her talk; and yet in every hour she seemed to grow softer and more gentle. She said the most touching things as again and again she thanked him.

"You are too good to me, Eric—oh, so much too good. . . . There never was any one like you."

And once she said, "Eric, I wonder if you'll ever understand why people get fond of you—or if you did know, whether you would lose some of your strength with us. But you're unconscious of it—you always were—and nothing spoils you, nothing changes you. . . . Are you listening?"

"Yes," he said; "but I don't know what you're driving at. Why these sudden and unmerited compliments?"

"Silly boy. . . . I never pay you compliments. I know you don't want compliments, any more than I want them myself. I was only meditating, going to the root of things. Yes," and she laughed. "Fernande, if you had encouraged her, was about to be profound, illuminating, and epigrammatic. It amounts to this, Eric," and she spoke rather sadly. "As I have often informed you, a frightful lot of nonsense is talked and written about men and women—about what attracts and what repels—about the subjugation of one sex by the other—and all the rest of it. But the fact is that the most terribly effective weapon a man can use against a woman is kindness. I don't believe any woman can resist it, if the weapon is used consistently, over a length of time. It is by kindness that men get the most unlikely women—and make slaves of them. At least, that's my experience of the world. But I

oughtn't to lay down the law about women. They are a sealed book to me, really."

"Poor Fernande," he said gently, answering the expression of her face rather than her words. "Have people been unkind to you—I mean in the past, before I knew you?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Yes, and no, Eric. No more than I deserved—I dare say."

"Do you realise," he said, again very gently, "how little I know about you? You have never told me anything."

"There's nothing worth knowing"; and she frowned, as she always did when asked questions about herself. Then after a little while the frown disappeared and he saw that her lips were trembling. "Do you *want* to know, Eric?" she said humbly and deprecatingly.

"I want nothing that you don't want."

"Thank you, dear."

They had a favourite seat on a path low down under the shelter of the cliff, and they sat there in the morning after this conversation.

All round them the pine trees, ragged and brown of stem, broke the warm sunshine and made a patchwork of light and shade among the tufts of rank verdure, gorse bushes, and brambles that clung to the dark crumbling earth of the cliff side. A little way below them they could see the smooth roadway and a bank with bushes and small crouching trees on it. Beyond that lay the flat tranquil sea, and from it there came a gentle murmur as its scarcely perceptible wave washed the unseen beach.

Other pleasant sounds in the air were children's laughing voices and the faintly heard music of a band on the cliff top.

"You know, Eric," she said, smiling happily, "just here where we're sitting is awfully like the South of France. One of the small places. Fréjus, Antibes, St. Raphael. What pretty names they are! Or is it only association? Once I was two months at St. Raphael with Dick."

"Who is Dick?"

"My husband."

"Oh. Yes—of course."

"Yachting. An accident to his yacht. We had to come ashore and put up at the Britannique Hotel. I can see it—palm trees, things like giant pineapples, and tiny little lawns, pelouses à l'Anglaise, with the tall sparse grass, sown that autumn, making me think of a thin green beard on a brown face! After luncheon, you know—all of us outside on the dusty gravel taking our coffee—and Dick angry because I refused a liqueur. His voice was so loud that people looked round at us. I was getting accustomed to that, you know, and the eternal job of quieting him. It made me miserable. But I couldn't give way about the cognac. I couldn't. I dared not encourage him—even in that small thing, and to gain a little peace."

She sat for a little while silent, frowning; and then suddenly, without prelude, she began to tell him the whole story of her life.

"I didn't love my mother, Eric. Does that shock you? You never had a mother to remember, and perhaps you can't really know how much it means to say such a thing, and what a frightful irreparable loss it implies—especially

to a girl. She wasn't kind to me. She was very unkind, Eric."

He had got up, and he stood, with his back against a pine tree immediately opposite to the seat, watching her face. She went on speaking as if she had set herself a task and was determined to go through with it, engrossing herself in it, forgetting everything else. Now and then she stretched out her hands, but not to him, to the void, to the past. Often she addressed him directly, and except for that, it was soon as if she had lost consciousness of his presence. She wanted no answers from him, but went straight on with her tale, a little like a person talking in sleep or in a trance. When people came along the path and walked between them, as happened several times, she stopped till they had passed, and then went on again.

"My father left my mother before I could remember. An old servant of ours—Emma—a dear—told me about it, and said I wasn't to blame him for running away from her. I didn't blame him. It seemed perfectly natural. It was what I often wanted to do myself. I didn't hate her, Eric—I just suffered under her. When I was away from her I lost sight of how cruel she had been. At school I wrote her just the same letters that the other girls wrote their mothers—'My dearest Mum, and all the rest of it. In the holidays, if she relented after being beastly to me, I hugged her and kissed her and watered her with my tears. Any rare act of kindness seemed to wipe out everything.

"Children are very magnanimous. They forgive and forgive. They do more than forgive, they forget. You'll read that in reports of societies like the Waifs and Strays.

If you remove a child from the most horrible and long-continued ill-usage, it recovers. Its wounds heal themselves, its poor little crushed heart expands, fear and horror go out of it, and scarcely a trace is left. A very little makes a child happy.

"Also please note, Eric, that in almost every life there is some happiness. There was a lot of it in mine, really. I am showing you the darker side, unrelieved by all the sunbeams. I was happy at school. To me school was home and home was school.

"Eric, when you're thinking of your childhood, have you ever tried to worry out when it was exactly that you learned or came to know some particular thing? Not things taught—seven times seven, the moon rising in the east, and the earth going round the sun. Of course, as the books tell us, knowledge is streaming into us all the time, from babyhood onwards, recognitions, new understandings, and so on. But I don't mean that either. I mean something isolated, and of importance to one's self, that one finds out. Looking back, one recalls a period when one didn't know it, and then afterwards one knew.

"I can't remember when I first found out that there was something frightfully wrong about mother—that she was wicked, with men; that her life was simply a pursuit of men—first one, then another. Anyhow, I know it was very early, when I was absurdly young to have understood such a thing as that. It wasn't old Emma giving me hints. I worried it out by myself; and as soon as I knew, I understood that Emma knew quite well and had always known. I loathed the knowledge. It was like a disgusting secret about somebody—as if I had acci-

dentally caught sight of her naked body and seen that she had a disease—sores or something appalling—or that she was misshapen. I carried the secret unaided; but of course it set my thoughts prematurely working on the worst sort of lines"; and she laughed softly. "Eric, I record these trifles because they all have their importance for the proper understanding of the intricate problem now known to you and the rest of the world as Fernande.

"If I could have talked about it, it wouldn't have been so bad for me. Emma was out of the question. But I wanted to tell my sister, Angela." As she said this her face grew sad. "I didn't, because Angela was an invalid —something wrong with her spine. Angela was the thing I loved best on earth. She was the *only* thing I loved. She was a lot older than I was. She died while I was at school—in the middle of a winter term. When I came back the couch on which she used to lie near the fire in the drawing-room had been pushed back against the wall, and it had a lot of gramophone discs on it and mother's books from the circulating library. Sacrilege! I went upstairs to my room and howled. It seemed to me that Angela had died only a week ago instead of two months, and that people were desecrating her grave.

"Well, I had wanted to tell about mother to Angela. But I hadn't done it. Just as I knew instinctively that Emma knew, I knew that Angela didn't know. I felt glad I hadn't made her know. It was my one tiny bit of comfort.

"I had another sister, Evelyn, much older still; but she was only a half sister. She had married a man called Tyrrell and gone to live in Australia. And I had

two brothers—one half, one whole—Bryan and Sigismund. I can't remember that I ever saw either of them. In the quarrel and the arrangements of the separation they had taken father's side—or anyhow gone away with father. I have never seen them. I believe they were both killed in the war. But I'm not sure of that even.

"In London I have often thought that some day a man would come up close to me, staring at me, searching my lineaments, as Walter Scott says—a man in a fur coat, with his hat cocked, and a big cigar—or a beggar selling matches—any man—and then he would say, 'Yes, I recognise the family likeness. Are you not Fernande Vincent? I thought so. I am Sigismund, your brother.' I couldn't say he wasn't. But that won't happen. It is only one of the silly fancies with which I amuse myself as I go on my modest unobtrusive way. Men *do* stare at me now and then, in spite of downcast eyes and quickly averted head; but they are not brothers. It's the last thing they'd say they were"; and she laughed again.

"Eric dear, isn't it wonderful how families scatter like dead leaves to the four winds of heaven? Father died before mother. All these people I am speaking of are ghosts"; and she made that gesture of outstretched hands and looked straight before her as if seeing nothing.

Her face brightened and she went on gaily.

"My first love affair was like Adam and Eve's. It took place in a garden. See *Genesis*. Orthodox, wasn't I? Not to say conventional. Yes, in the garden at school—the kitchen garden—with all the fruits of the earth round us! Herbert was the son of the head gardener. He was

a dear. I caught him alone in the walled part, in the sunlight by the southern wall, with the ripe peaches showing alluringly through the long narrow leaves." And she talked now in the rapid style that she used for narratives which were intended to amuse, gaily, mischievously. "I asked him to pick a peach and give it to me. There—the legend renewing itself—as true to-day as at the beginning of the world. The woman tempted him. But it was *I* that did eat of the forbidden fruit. Herbert refused at first. It was so terribly against all laws.

"I must tell you, for your further information, it was a good school, Eric. I believe, by the terms of her allowance from father, mother was obliged to have me properly educated. They didn't have the usual mania for games. They ran religion harder than hockey. We had a private chapel instead of a gymnasium. Very high—all ritual! Requests for the intercession of the Saints were winked at, but it was not allowed on any pretence to pray to the Virgin Mary. We did, of course, because we oughtn't to. . . . But what was I going to say? Oh, yes. The garden figured in the prospectus as one of the amenities. You know the sort of thing. 'Classical tuition by diplomaed masters; riding taught on scientific principles; fresh garden produce throughout the year from our own garden!' But, as you may guess, the greengrocers got the contents of our garden, not us. It was sold—throughout the year.

"Where was I? Herbert refused—at first. I slunk away abashed—I had no business to be in the garden,—but ere I had gone through the little door leading to the extensive grounds—grounds of large extent also men-

tioned in the prospectus—where my comrades were recreating themselves, he came trotting after me. 'There,' he said, and proffered three enormous peaches on a cabbage leaf. He asked me my name, and I let him kiss me.

"From that day I had a brief spell of triumph. I became a provider of peaches for other girls. Knowing nothing of Herbert, they looked upon me with awe and admiration. They thought me daring beyond human limits. They believed of course that I marauded in the garden by myself. 'Don't mention it,' I used to say. 'Just state how many peaches you want to-day, and I'll do my best.'

"Herbert used to say, 'Here's a round dozen, Furnornde.' I tried to teach him to say my name properly, but he couldn't. Our commerce took place in a big lean-to shed out of sight of the upper windows—a sort of tool-house. 'Now, Furnornde,' he said, 'I mean to have a kiss apiece for them.' And I said, 'Help yourself, Herbert. My kisses aren't nearly as rare or valuable as your peaches. I think I get the best of the bargain.' 'Oh, Furnornde,' said Herbert. My light badinage enchanted him. I didn't mind his kissing me a little bit. He smelt of all the things in the tool-house blended together—fine sifted earth and sand for the potting plants, dried bulbs lying on shelves, the new-mown grass sticking to blades of the big mowing machine, and bales of that stuff—what do they call it?—bast? It was a nice clean smell—Herbert's.

"Well, of course this couldn't go on. I don't mean the kisses—the peach thefts. The rifled trees told their story, there were kernels in all the dormitory slop pails, an

idiotic girl was sick and confessed. As your beloved French would say, *La verité éclata de toutes parts à la fois*. There was an inquest on the largest scale, and Herbert tried to shield me and I tried to shield Herbert. We each accepted full guilt. Somehow or other a lenient view was taken. I wasn't punished.

"But I had made a scandal.

"I soon made another. Again it was traditional, conventional—an affair with a master. Mr. Bradfield! He was a thin grey-haired man who used to give me an hour's Latin twice a week in the little private room—who had done so for ages. There were two other girls. But one week they went away for an examination—and, Eric, he made love to me. Think a little. Imagine me. I was just over fourteen. A long skinny pasty-faced thing with a large nose and an immense black pig-tail. Compared with the pretty girls of the school, I considered myself as absolutely repulsive. What did he see in me? By what distortion of normal instincts and intelligence could he behave as if I was a grown-up person? Things like this only happen in schools. It is as though people in schools lose all sense of proportion, just as they say that doctors of asylums for the insane go cracked themselves. He told me that he worshipped me and always had. At first I giggled and thanked him and said it was awfully nice of him to say so. Then something about him so strange, so different, scared me; and when he took hold of me I went half mad with fear. I struggled and squeaked like a rabbit. I went on squeaking till a mistress came into the room. He had let go of me, and perhaps he might have saved himself. I wouldn't have sneaked—I

don't think so—and perhaps the mistress mightn't have guessed. But he said it all over again, to *her*, if you please—that he must have me, that he would never stop trying to get me, that no one must come between us. Raving!

"That was the end of Mr. Bradfield, and very nearly the end of me. They thought of expelling me—as dangerous.

"I was a marked girl. You know, as I said, it wasn't like a school of to-day—like a boy's school, with prefects and all that. But they talked of courage and self-reliance, playing the game, and things not being cricket. But in spite of all the talk there was a lot of mean espionage—and girls, especially the bigger girls, were really encouraged to tell tales and act as detectives. I felt that many eyes were on me, many hands against me. One of the mistresses gave me a friendly warning to be very circumspect. Circumspect! Well, they watched, but they could find no sin in Fernande. The woman was still pure.

"So they lifted the ban. The Criminal Investigation Department no longer kept me under observation. I was to stay. But the headmistress had me in her room and gave me a few words—from heart to heart. She told me that there were certain girls about whom men were apt to get 'silly,' and she feared that I was one of them. It was their misfortune, not their fault. It was simply an affliction. And she as good as said that in her youth she herself had been thus afflicted and had suffered the utmost annoyance and mortification because of it.

"What funny people women are! As I often tell you,

I don't understand women. I never have. I know too much—alas, far too much—about men. But women still baffle me—except one woman—myself. And I am not sure she doesn't too.

"Mother took me away from school when I was sixteen—the earliest time that she was allowed to, I suppose. I wanted to stay on. I shed salt tears at leaving.

"Nearly all girls come from school with a rather priggish determination to devote themselves to and improve their families—to act guide and martyr at the same time—to drop a few useful hints, and turn the other cheek if the hints get one into trouble. I wanted to devote myself to mother and to reform her. After several contraband one-sided discussions with the Virgin Mary, it seemed to me a plain duty. And a pleasure too. For, Eric, I felt my heart bursting for an outlet. I longed to be able to treat mother—well, as a mother. I had affection, restored confidence, even filial respect waiting to pour into her lap—and, oh, above all, affection. The passionate absorbing affection without which I felt I couldn't live—that I have wanted—needed—all my life, Eric—oh, all my life!"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"It was no go. A wash-out.

"I joined mother at Weymouth. She had just taken a house there, outside the town, and she asked all her men to it—such men. If any nice people took us up they soon dropped us. All our friends were second-class—not really ladies and gentlemen. And before long the females deserted us altogether, and only our males were left. Directly mother was introduced to one she went for him—

'Pray come and see us. What are you doing this evening? Why not come to supper?'

"To this day, if I become effusive, if I hear my voice with a really cordial ring in it, I shiver and turn cold, and think, 'That was too like mother.'

"Supper was her favourite meal, and she always said, 'Don't dress. Don't dream of changing.' . . . Why shouldn't they dress decently?" And Fernande's face was terrible in its scorn. "The *swine!* At the common trough! Of course they were the dreadful sort of men who are always shy of evening clothes—who ask, 'Is it full fig? Are we supposed to put on our go-to-meeting togs?' and such abysmal questions as that. We sat round the table, and they ate too much, they drank too much, and mother became more and more the soul of gaiety. How I loathed it—their faces getting red from the food. Their jokes, their laughter. Towards the end mother told them beastly stories—and I just suffered. I could not laugh, I dared not cry.

"That's why I can't ever stand highly spiced conversation. I can't help looking down my nose and showing I don't like it, even if I'm trying to be civil. I know it must seem queer in me—all things considered.

"They all called mother Lilian. That too I hated. It was so insultingly familiar. You must remember, everybody didn't use Christian names as they do now. *Eheu fugaces.* It's a longish time ago. Well, about mother's dirty tales! One evening I had to go back into the dining-room where the men still were, and I heard what one of them said, chuckling, you know. 'Isn't old Lilian a scream when she gets primed up and talks bawdy?'

"I had never heard the word, but of course I knew what it meant. I looked it up in the dictionary to make sure. Then I went along the Parade towards the harbour saying to myself, 'My mother is bawdy. Mother is bawdy.' To stop myself repeating it, I prayed—walking along, you know, all by the cabs and cruelty-vans—and the niggers. I prayed to the Virgin Mary, pointing out to her that this was peculiarly a case demanding her attention. 'O Mother of God, cleanse her heart, take away this foulness from her tongue, and cure her of her sinful acts. Sweet kind Mary, Mother of God, have pity on me and hear my prayer.'

"Eric, can you bear it? Am I shocking you too much?"

He had not spoken all this time, and he did not speak now.

"I still wore my pig-tail. It was a little longer, a little thicker round the root. Some of mother's friends admired it, and said it was fetching. Two of them—an awfully horsy captain of garrison artillery and an older man—used to pull my tail, as if I had been a cat, and stroke and caress me in public. If they ever got me alone they tried to take further liberties. They didn't smell like Herbert, they smelled of stale tobacco, strong drink, and pomatum. It was a stuffy indoors smell. I dodged them as best I could, not daring to make a fuss.

"Eric, dear, picture me again. Imagine me—a poor little devil of sixteen—afraid of them, but more afraid of mother; not daring to make a fuss.

"I repulsed them with would-be facetiousness, holding up my finger to them reprovingly, and saying, 'Now, be good. Behave yourself, or I shall think you are nothing

better than a bold bad man. Stand aside, sir, and let me pass.' You know. Any rot—any tags of talk that I'd picked up from them themselves. And as soon as I could I slipped out of reach.

"Then I made my next shattering discovery. Mother was growing jealous of me. She didn't like them taking notice of me. She didn't relish their compliments about my pig-tail. One day she said it was the weight of my hair that gave me headaches. I had no headaches. But she summoned the hairdresser up from the town and made him cut my hair right off, quite short. Emma said, 'I don't know why ever you want to do it,' and she kept on saying this; but *I* knew why—and mother knew that I knew. She wanted to disfigure me. I was afraid that Emma and the others might guess. The hairdresser set to work. No words could ever say the shame I felt. It was like a public whipping. I would rather have been whipped, for that would have been a human normal punishment—this was inhuman. I felt like an animal being held down, shorn, and then let loose again. When it was over I laughed and shook my head, and said I didn't mind—and mother and I looked at each other. We understood.

"The shearing did no good. The first thing her infernal captain said was that I looked more fetching than ever. Mother said I had better let my hair grow again. This jealousy of mother's seemed to me the last blow—more disgusting than anything up till then. Of course I see now that she couldn't help it. She had no control over her thoughts. Her hobby had become a craze; it was verging towards insanity. She was getting too old. She couldn't

bear to think of all that was slipping away from her, and all that was coming to me.

"I had two years of it—absolute hell. Yet again I seemed to be dogged by tradition or unoriginality. It was such an old situation. French novelists love it and use it to the present day—the adolescent daughter living with a mother who is a cocotte. Mother of course wasn't a professional tart. She had all the clumsiness and stupidity of an amateur—crude in her methods, without art or finesse. She was a man-hunter, not a man-seducer. She was fierce in pursuit, overwhelming when she succeeded in striking down her prey. Yes, she was the man-hunter, and I naturally became the man-dodger. I learnt every trick of evasion. I can tell you, I was soon devilish deceitful. I *had* to be. It was self-protection.

"A little after I was eighteen we went to some hunt races. Mother loved all public festivals, all noisy gatherings, and she had the faculty of turning even an ordinary expedition into something like a factory bean-feast. She used to say, 'Oh, do let's make up a party for it.' We made our party. We went in a hired brake almost as big as one of the cruelty vans, with four horses, and a man by the driver blowing a horn. When we got there I hated the feeling of being utterly out of it. A group of pariahs! Really we were as different from the nice well-bred country people who all knew one another as if we had had black faces and banjos, like the nigger minstrels on the beach.

"A man called Sanford rode the winner in two of the races, and, strange as it seems, one of our gang knew him, and brought him over to us. He was a gentleman. It

was Dick. I can see him now in his long red coat with a white band and a number round his arm, and his white breeches all splashed with mud.

"'Good old Sanford! Well done, old boy! Have a drink. You've earned it.'

"You can imagine how we clustered round him, and made much of him.

"'The greatest pleasure,' said mother, with warmth and gush. Metaphorically she smothered him with embraces; she clung to him, begging him never to leave us. She said that now the hunting season was over he would have nothing to do—nowhere to go. He had better come to supper with us to-morrow night, next night, every night.

"To my surprise and joy he did come to see us. Dick, they said, was rich. He hunted in the winter, he yachted in the summer. I prayed again, praying that Dick might give me my escape. In fear and trembling lest mother should see what was going on, I changed my ways, I ceased to dodge—I pursued.

"Dick eloped with me—or I eloped with him—don't ask me which. With a very brief delay we were legally made one. Dick insisted on this. I was not a bit anxious to get married. In fact I thought I was safer with him unmarried—that if I remained in social disgrace mother would be more likely to leave me alone. I dreaded that if I was married she might have some power of getting me back. That was rubbish, of course.

"Dick was awfully good to me. I can never forget that. Dick had but one fault—the bottle. It didn't show in the winter. When he kept himself fit by his riding he

was able to stand up against it, but every summer he went to pieces. And of course it got worse and worse—there was no stopping him. I was with him for more than three years, and all the time he was getting through his money as fast as he could. Towards the end I had a dreadful time with him. He made rows in hotels—we never had a home. When he was drunk, if I locked my door at night he battered on it, waking the whole corridor with his tipsy clamour. He wanted his rights. His rights!—and hang my wrongs."

She laughed, and then for a sentence or two gave an imitation of a temperance speech by a platform orator. "Oh, my friends, never underestimate the awful far-reaching effects of alcohol. Never mock at prohibition. Never sneer at that great country across the sea that has purified its public morals and brought peace and plenty to the homeside by banishing the taint and reproach of wetness and becoming irrevocably *dry*.

"There is only one thing in the world more horrible than a drunken man, and that is a drunken woman. I have made you ashamed of me in many ways, my poor Eric, but never that way, have I?

"Just as mother cured me of any liking for lewd talking, Dick for ever expelled the inclination for the warmth and comfort of drink.

"I stood it as long as I could, and then did a bolt. By myself, Eric—with no accomplice. I went to his solicitors in London, and told them that he must do something for me. They said it was highly irregular of me to leave him, and I said it was highly irregular of him to force me to do so. I had several nagging matches with those solici-

tors, and in the end it was arranged that he should give me an allowance of a hundred a year. They paid it for a little while, and then stopped. But even while I was getting it, two pounds a week wasn't enough. I couldn't live on it. Eric, I didn't live on it. . . . You know what I mean by that?" And she was silent for a little while.

"God, how I was knocked about! I don't mean with blows and physical violence, but by every base contact—every degrading submission—every mean surrender of natural pride. How they took it out of me! How they made me pay for their largesse and their gifts! Wasn't it Herbert Spencer who said that woman first learned to be tactful when she lived in a cave with her beast of a man, and through the smoke of the fire watched his face while he was eating his evening meal? If he liked it, it would be all right. If it disagreed with him, it would be bad for her. I acquired that tactfulness for which I am justly famous in the same school. Except for deceit, artfulness, quickness of wit, I was so helpless, so utterly at their mercy. Think how young I was still!

"*Apologia pro mea vita!* Of course I am trying to make out the best case I can. I am glozing things over, I am leaving things out, but nothing essential, Eric, nothing that would make any difference if I put it in.

"Cyril Faulkner came along, and I took him as my second escape. Cyril knew Dick. They belonged to the same part of the country; and Dick had asked him to hunt me out—to see if I was behaving myself nicely, if I had continued to lead a blameless life. . . . You know, Cyril's family is quite a good one. But he was different

from the rest of them. They were all sons of the local soil, and he had wider views. Cyril says his father was like the stage baronet of forty years ago.

"By the way, have you ever read Cyril's entry in *Who's Who?* In *Who's Who* those who run may read—that is, if they are running with their spectacles on their noses, for the print is small—that Faulkner, Cyril Wentworth, took honours at Cambridge, went to the bar, wrote plays, acted and unacted, and volumes of poetry; also that he did his duty in the European War of 1914-18, being twice mentioned in despatches. . . . When he came back from France he found that his practice had gone and he went into journalism. Cyril could have done anything"; and she said again, as she had often said before, "Cyril had great gifts. Yes, the fairies gave Cyril everything at his christening except a mental backbone. The war had worn him out—as it did in so many cases. He had no energy left. He let things slide, he began to let everything go.

"But I want you to understand that the Cyril of those days was very different from the Cyril of to-day. So far as I was concerned he was more than an escape, he was salvation. Cyril gave me my first real chance. He gave me a sort of secondary education. He encouraged me intellectually in every possible way. He opened up the world of literature to me as it had never been opened till then. He taught me to write a little, to understand something of art. Cyril did wonders for me.

"Of course we ought to have cleared the ground of Dick. It could easily have been done. Cyril told him

at once that we were living together, and Dick was furious at first. I'm sure he would have divorced me if we'd taken any trouble, but we didn't.

"I would like you to understand all my feelings about it, and to make you think of Cyril kindly—whatever he does now. He was all right then. Compared with Dick, he scarcely drank at all. As to being married to him or not, it was nothing to me. Cyril was my man. I always think of him in that way. He had saved me from the dire discomforts of polyandry—that's the word, isn't it? —and made me a respectable monogamist. That was enough for me—at that time. I felt ever so much more married to Cyril than to Dick. *O apologia pro mea vita!*

"Since then Cyril has made me eat some more of the large peck of dirt that was originally allotted to me as my portion. He has been beastly to me often. After helping me to raise myself a little way he has tried to help to get me down again. But I mustn't blame him for that. I suppose I ought to blame myself for not having had the strength of character to keep him on the upgrade. I tried for a long time—I never stopped trying."

She clasped her hands on her lap and looked straight in front of her. When she turned and spoke again, her voice was very gentle.

"Eric, dear. That's all that there is to Fernande. You wanted to know. So I have told you. I have never told any one else."

XVII

One morning in October Eric was summoned to the library for what Cornish termed "a quiet confab."

As he went along the corridor he heard the sound of Miss Ruth's violin in the music room, and he thought, "This is the first time she has practised since she came back from Italy. It must mean that she is in better spirits." For a minute he paused outside the door listening.

He found Cornish sitting idle at his writing-table as if lost in thought.

"You wanted to speak to me?"

"Yes," said Cornish, rousing himself from his meditation. "Sit down. There's two things I want to speak of, Eric," and his tone was unusually mild and affectionate. "But first of all I want to thank you for cheering us up last night. You were splendid company, and you did Ruth and me all the good in the world."

Last night, Eric, who was now again living in Sloane Street, had come to dine with the father and daughter alone. There were no social festivities of any kind this autumn. Miss Cornish could not even support the customary gathering of sisters and children; she had been far from well in Italy and had tired herself in Paris; Mr. Cornish, as Eric knew, was uneasy about her. Indeed many members of the household were wondering what

was the matter with their young lady, and no one had been more concerned and sympathetic than Eric.

He said now that he had enjoyed his evening immensely and had been delighted to see that Miss Cornish was much more like herself.

"Yes," said Cornish, looking at him shrewdly and yet rather wistfully, "that's true—or half true. She was more like what she was last summer. But she wasn't quite my little girl of a year ago. However, I'll come to that presently. Let us take things in their order." His tone, although still affectionate, had become brisk and strong. He had the manner that he employed in board-rooms and at public meetings, making logical points, and seeming innocently pleased with the neat arrangement of his discourse. "I have to talk to you on two subjects, and for two reasons. Reason Number One: I like you, Eric. I like you very much. Every word I'm going to say will prove it—so please bear with me, for I mean to be quite open and go straight ahead over delicate ground. Very well. Subject Number One: A certain lady that you and I both know—a married lady that you habitually speak of as a great friend! You guess the party I allude to?"

Eric guessed the party to whom allusion was made. The description of her as a married woman was correct, although Cornish used it erroneously in reference to somebody who did not happen to be her husband. But it was not for Eric to clear up the misconception. Embarrassed by this turn that the talk had taken, he nevertheless spoke firmly.

"You mean Mrs. Faulkner. What about her?"

"Well, just this. If you don't want to mess yourself

up for good and all, isn't it high time to pull up short—and precious short too?"

Eric spoke indignantly.

"Now don't be touchy," said Cornish. "Hear me out. Let me put it to you quite straight. She's your friend. Well and good. Nevertheless can it be wise, can it be necessary, to parade the fact as you're doing?"

"I am not ashamed of the fact."

"Ah, that may be. But you don't answer the point. Is it wise to allow other people to draw wrong conclusions?"

"I can't prevent them. And it's nothing to me what people choose to think."

"Well, look here, Eric," and Cornish spoke very affectionately indeed. "I know you're above board—you're a kind-hearted fellow. But I ask you, how can anybody help thinking there's something wrong when they see a good-looking young fellow of your sort hanging after an attractive woman of her sort—and, mark me, a woman who notoriously has an unscrupulous blackguard of a husband?"

"It's not the case that I hang after her—as you call it. Besides, I am not seen with her."

"My dear boy," and Cornish laughed good-humouredly, "more people see Tom Fool than Tom Fool sees."

"Thank you for the compliment. But does it apply?"

"Carry your mind back. She came here one day last summer, didn't she? And I asked you to get rid of her, didn't I? Now what happens? Off you go with her, arm in arm, like lovers—past all the clubs and along Piccadilly. Was that wise? Was that necessary? Every one

who noticed it must surely draw conclusions. My daughter noticed it. Ruth was surprised. She couldn't understand—she drew conclusions. She asked questions. I told her there was nothing in it. You had given me to understand so—and I believed you. Ruth believed."

Eric remained silent. The mention of Ruth troubled him.

"Again—in Scotland, you leave us when we want to keep you with us. No, you must go. What happens? You go and stay with her at an hotel at Folkestone. Of course you were seen there. Of course the thing was noticed. People spread the tale of it. Now was that wise of you? Was it quite fair to *us*."

"Really, Mr. Cornish, I don't see that it concerns you."

"Oh, by Jupiter, doesn't it? That's a rotten thing to say."

"Then I'm sorry I said it. I'll answer you frankly. Mrs. Faulkner was staying at Folkestone after an illness. I went down to see her and spent a week at the same hotel. What possible harm could there be in that?"

"You're a queer fellow, Eric"; and Cornish smiled. "You're sharp enough. Yes, your head's screwed on all right. You can look all round and well ahead, and yet you don't always see things a few inches in front of your nose." Then he resumed a serious tone. "Let us be quite clear. The lady is a friend. Have I your loyal assurance that she isn't something else too?"

"Yes."

"And never has been anything else?"

"No."

"And you have no intention of ever making her anything but that?"

"No."

"On your honour, Eric?"

"On my honour."

"I am satisfied, fully satisfied," said Cornish.

Eric had hesitated before he replied to these questions, and then it had seemed to him that Cornish was justified in asking them, that it was a duty to answer them freely. Why not? There was nothing to conceal.

Now he spoke with warm praise of Fernande, telling Cornish of the regard in which he held her and of his intense regret that so charming and brilliant a woman was not more happily situated in life; and he wound up by saying that she had been to him the best friend a man ever had.

"Best fiddlestick. How you din that word!" said Cornish fretfully. "However, no matter. That's the end of the subject. At least I'll only add this much. It won't do—the business you've carried on for so long in that quarter. You may be sorry for her and feel very chivalrous and grand about it, but it isn't right, it really won't do. *I*'m sorry for her. I pity her. But she's made her bed and she must lie on it. She must stew in her own gravy. We—you and I—can't safely meddle with her. So I say to you that, whatever happens between us two, wherever this chat leads to, you have got to cut it. Even if you were to remain a free lance, if you weren't going to take up other obligations, you'd *have* to be quit of it."

Cornish had left his seat at the writing-table, and he walked about the room. He came back smiling.

"Very well. Now for subject Number Two—more delicate than the other! My daughter—Ruth! And reason Number Two. I suppose I needn't pretend it'll be any news to you to hear that Ruth also likes you, Eric—she is fonder of you, considerably fonder of you, than I am"; and he laughed, and stood rubbing his hands together. "But perhaps you haven't quite expected to hear the next bit. Eric, I don't object. You have my permission to go full speed ahead. I want you to; for I believe you are the only man who is likely to make her happy. . . . Well? What have you got to say to that?"

Eric had nothing to say for a space of time that seemed long. He was overwhelmed by wonder and by sensations that he himself could scarcely interpret. Ruth fond of him—her father willing that she should marry him! He felt as if swept out of ordinary life into the fantastic world of fairy tales. The fairies had given him some magic talisman, and by aid of it he had triumphed over the hundred other suitors and had won the heart of the proud princess. The old king was telling him so.

"I—I never once thought of such a thing as possible," he stammered.

"Oh, bunkum," said Cornish forcibly. "How could you help thinking of it? But you have hung back, very properly, no doubt, in telling your thoughts. Notwithstanding your modesty they have been guessed all right. Never thought of it? Rubbish. Anyhow you had better think of it now, and think hard."

"Of course I admire Miss Cornish very greatly."

"Admire her! Yes, you have shown that plainly

enough." Cornish's face grew very red and he stared at Eric. "But you do more than that, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. I value her opinion enormously. If I may say so, I like her enormously."

"You gave her good reason to suppose so." Cornish spoke almost pleadingly. "Eric, I haven't made a mistake, have I? All this summer there was real meaning in your behaviour towards her, wasn't there?"

"Honestly, Mr. Cornish, I never for a moment thought that you—that Miss Ruth could possibly do me this great honour."

"Why, man, she made your word law. What you liked and what you didn't like decided everything. She laid the lot of us at your feet. In Scotland too. And last night! Didn't you mean what you said to her last night—how she had been missed, how the house was different in her absence, and you wanted her to get well and not desert us by going away again? Didn't you mean it?"

"Yes," said Eric eagerly, "I did mean it. I meant every word of it."

"And because of what you said she immediately recovers her spirits and her health. She gets back her interest in life. She tells me this morning that she has changed her mind and would like to remain here in London instead of going to the South of France for the winter. Just a few words—and you have done for her what *I* couldn't do, and what the doctors couldn't do, and what nobody could do except yourself. Now you may be modest, but you're not an ass. You must see what this indicates plainly enough."

"Mr. Cornish, I really am overwhelmed. I don't know how to express myself."

"Don't you?" And Cornish's voice became very firm. "Then I'll go on with it. You said I was doing you an honour. Well, I think I am—doing you the greatest honour one man can do another. But don't pick up the wrong end of the stick. This business is not to be one-sided—on my daughter's side only. If you can't respond, if you can't give her faithful love in return for what I know she is ready to give you, then the whole thing must end here, and now."

But Eric could respond, he was already responding. In every moment since the dazzling fact of Ruth's affection had been burst upon him his heart had grown warmer, softer, more full of gratitude and joy. It seemed to him that he had been in love with her ever since the time when they first began to talk to each other without shyness or reserve; it seemed that he had known that he loved her, but thinking her inaccessible, he had never dared to recognize his condition. This was not true really; it was an illusion. He had been willing to love and no more; but the knowledge that love would be reciprocal changed his whole state of mind, gave strength to many normal longings, and relaxed the fetters of a hundred thwarted hopes. As he thought of her, it was as though she had come into the room and he was looking at her. He saw her pretty hair, her questioning eyes, her hands held towards him; and when he spoke, it was almost as if he had been speaking to her herself and not to her father.

"I swear I would do my best to make her happy. It should be the business of my life."

"Ah," said Cornish, with loud satisfaction, "now you're talking like a man—at last."

And after this he said wonderful things while Eric listened as if in a happy trance, hearing the kind strong voice and yet thinking his own thoughts all the while.

Cornish told him he need have no hesitation on the score of pride; he should render himself independent of a rich wife by his own honest work; he would be Cornish's partner in course of time, and finally his successor. Also he would be bringing great happiness to Cornish at once.

"The strongest of us have our weak spots, Eric, and my weak spot is Ruth. We are all dreamers too, big and small, and *my* dream has been for Ruth to marry a man who wouldn't altogether take her away from me—some decent fellow that I like and would put up with my ways —so that we could live together most of the time. Finding you—alone in the world—no father and mother—I thought of it very soon. And when I saw my girl singling you out, thinks I, 'This is the fellow to make my dream come true.' "

Then he said that Eric had better absent himself from the house for a week or ten days, and during this period, not only reflect quietly on the future, but also tidy up and arrange his present existence. As an excuse for his absence Cornish had in fact some little business for him in Paris. He could run over there at once, finish Cornish's task, and then clear off everything in London.

"But I really have nothing to do," said Eric.

"Oh, yes, you have," said Cornish, with a touch of sternness. "You have got to break off definitely and for

ever with Mrs. Faulkner." And he held up his hand warningly to stop Eric from making any protest. "That's the whole point. That's the essence of our bargain. Before you propose to my daughter, you'll be good enough to write to me and report that it is done. My girl's husband—or the man she's engaged to marry—must have no lady friend. There isn't a self-respecting woman who would allow it. Least of all, Ruth." And again he held up his hand. "I know what you are going to say. You can't behave meanly to a person who has been kind to you and put you under obligations. I don't ask you to. If she really needs assistance she shall have it—generous assistance—but it must come through *me*, and not through you. Tell her, if you like, that she may look to me—in reason. And tell her—with no bunkum, no rot—that the little game between her and you is over. . . . One more word. You had better get off at once—I mean, from here."

"Then I am not to see Miss Cornish before I go?"

"No, I think not. . . . But hold on." Cornish meditated. "Yes, say a word of good-bye to her. Just tell her I am sending you to Paris, and you won't be back for a week at least. But non-committal. Not a word with meaning in it. I trust you."

She was still playing her violin, as if trying to make up for her neglect of it in this long morning's practise. She laid the instrument down gently and carefully, and turned to him with her sedate air and peering glance.

But Eric, face to face with her, felt a dreadful embarrassment. There rushed into his mind a memory of all the idiotic things that he had said to her—as when he ex-

pressed a wish to see her happily married. If she cared for him, such stupidity was unforgivable. But could it be true that she really cared for him? She seemed so calm as she waited till he should say something.

In a hurried blundering way he announced that he was on the point of departure for Paris.

Then he saw her calmness deserting her. The colour flickered in her face, and she looked at him intently.

"You tell other people to remain, and you go away yourself," she said hesitatingly.

"Yes, that appears inconsistent, doesn't it? But, well—I can't help myself."

"When may we expect to see you back?" And he saw that her cheeks were white and her eyes full of trouble. It was the look of a wounded person, too proud to confess pain, but involuntarily appealing for aid.

"In a week from now—not more. I shall come back as soon as I can, Ruth."

Her colour flickered again, blazed, faded; her eyes glowed at him, her lips smiled at him; while he stood confused, ashamed, after his tremendous slip of the tongue. Accidentally he had used her name in speech as he had used it in thought. He had called her Ruth.

"You can't come back too soon," and she held out her hand to him. "Not a day too soon—Eric."

He took her hand, so firm and yet so soft, so brave, as it lay in his, and then murmuring his good-bye left her, conscious that she watched him as he went down the long room.

He was excited, happy, but not without distress of mind. Had he betraved the trust that Cornish placed in him?

That exchange of Christian names without explanation or apology was like an avowal on his part and an acceptance on hers.

He went away from the house in a dream.

The great prize was to be his. The aloof princess had come down the steps of her throne, taken his hand, and said, "Here is the knight that I choose, and I will have none other." Life was truly a fairy tale. Naturally he felt pride, elation, joy in the splendour of his triumph; but this was all superficial, a boyish, a childish emotion that might be pardoned since it did not reach as far as his better, deeper thoughts. It was the girl, not the princess, that he wanted to marry. It was nothing to him that Ruth was rich, and that, whether he desired it or not, her husband must for ever be wrapped about with luxury. He had not a single mercenary thought in regard to the material advancement promised him as Cornish's son-in-law; but he looked forward delightedly to the close relationship with Cornish himself. His affection for Cornish had become very great. In the beginning it was instinctive; then it had been strengthened by respect and gratitude; now it was filial in its completeness.

He remained at his rooms all day, and most of it seemed dreamlike and unreal. He could not concentrate attention on outward tasks. Hour after hour he thought of Ruth, going over the past, making pictures of the future. What a wife to have won! Like Cornish, she was good all through, with his solid qualities and so much added. Steadfast! That was her word—the word that always

suggested itself if one thought of her character, her mind, her aspect. Steadfast, unchanging. She was brave and strong, but sweet too . . .

And the thought came again and again, "What have I done to deserve all this, and how can I prove worthy of it?"

Then as the day wore on he thought of Fernande. At first he did not measure the task that lay before him in telling the news to Fernande. He did not fear it. But gradually the coming interview with her seemed to grow difficult; more than difficult, an ordeal that he had good reason to dread. Gradually, foreboding anticipations of it began to take all the glory from his day.

In a sense she was prepared. She had known that he would marry sooner or later, and recently she had seemed to feel that he would not long remain a bachelor. That of course was what she had meant when she spoke of a great change in his life and made him promise he would tell her without delay. And from time to time she had sounded an echo of her words. No doubt now she would rejoice in his amazing good fortune. He could rely on her to consider his welfare rather than her own inclinations; and everything would be smooth and easy if he might have told her that this marriage would make little difference, that their friendship could continue, or that if interrupted it should be resumed. But he might not say so. He had to tell her that he was obliged to bring the friendship to an inexorable ending.

The condition imposed upon him seemed now hard and unfeeling, even mercilessly severe, as it affected her. For himself he knew that in truth Cornish was perfectly right

to demand it. One cannot have even the semblance of a divided allegiance. And Fernande as a background figure was impossible. One could not treat her as negligible for most of one's time and important or worthy of consideration at intervals, in leisure moments. She was too engrossing, too absorbing. She filled one's mind.

Then a newly-framed conjecture of a possibility startled him. Thinking once more of those enigmatic phrases of hers, he asked himself if in some mysterious manner she had divined that Ruth was fond of him. Had she seen when he had been blind, and understood while he was without a glimmer of comprehension? If indeed she had thus guessed, it proved how closely she watched and reflected upon the circumstances of his daily life. It meant that she was always thinking of him. It meant a constant unwavering regard.

His heart ached, his spirit quailed. The interview with Fernande was going to be terribly difficult.

He had said he would call for her, and at eight o'clock he was climbing the narrow staircase with leaden footsteps. Lamplight shone out to meet him on the top flight. The door stood open, and as soon as he reached it her voice sounded gaily from within.

"Is that Mr. Eric Bowen? . . . Come in, sir."

He went into the ugly little sitting-room, and she talked to him through the open doorway of her bedroom.

"I won't keep you a moment. I'm ready. Only giving final touches"; and she laughed. "Painting the lily, you know—whitening my big nose and adding more rubies to

my red, red lips . . . there. . . . You said I wasn't to dress. Am I all right?"

She had come from the bedroom and she took both his hands, then stepped back for him to inspect her. She was in black, with a purple scarf—her favourite colour—round her neck. He had never seen her looking more attractive.

"Bless you," she said, "for the happy inspiration of giving me a treat to-night. . . . I think it must have been telepathy. I was so down in the dumps, and then your note came, and the dead dog sprang up and wagged its tail. Fernande danced and capered. Where are we to feed?"

"Well, anywhere you like that's quiet."

"Then we'll go to a little new place I have discovered. It's close by. We'll walk."

She linked her arm in his with the old familiar movement as they went out into the street, and kept it there for a little while, pressing his arm against her and reminding him merely by the sensation of this bodily contact of countless past hours. He thought of what Cornish had said—"Arm in arm, like lovers." But this was the last time. It would never happen again.

"I love this place," she said happily, when they were seated at their table at the back of the new restaurant's one room. "It's so small—so cosy—so French. Wasn't it clever of me to find it?"

She ordered the dinner herself in friendly consultation with the head waiter, who already knew her well and treated her with immense deference as the grand and beautiful lady that was to make his fortune by bringing

all fashionable London in her train. Eric seemed to him a promising sample of future patrons. A subordinate waiter put things on the bare tablecloth—a basket of bread, white plates, heavy knives and forks, all in the very Frenchest style. Then came two tall candlesticks brought by a girl in a white apron, and he lit the candles.

"No, the ordinary Médoc." She was ordering the wine now, and she laughed. "The cheap wines are always the best. Gustave knows that."

"Just as madame wishes," said the head waiter, with a deferential smile. "Yes, it is a good wine."

She chattered then till the soup arrived in its unpolished metal tureen. A few men at other tables glanced at her admiringly and envied Eric. She knew this, without appearing to know it, and seemed to gain a heightened glow from the knowledge.

"Oh, my dear, I *am* so hungry."

Her face was bright in the candlelight. She had opened the purple scarf, and her smooth throat gleamed whitely. Every movement that she made was graceful, pleasant to watch. Who could help admiring her, feeling her charm, shrinking from the infliction of pain upon her? Eric thought, "I must tell her. It is cowardly to put it off."

"Yes," she said, "I believe I have got another job—eminently respectable—quite what you would approve of. I am to go on trial as manageress and doorkeeper of a tea-shop at Earl's Court. It's kept by two sisters—spinsters of repute—ladies to the tips of their poor old fingers. . . . Oh, how good this soup is. So hot too. Look another way, and I'll blow at it."

She was happy—happy because she was with him. For

no other reason. And he had to tell her that she would never enjoy this innocent happiness again, that this was their farewell meal, that after they had eaten and drunk they were to say good-bye for ever.

"They cook well here, don't they, Eric?" The fish had been brought, and she ate with appetite and yet sparingly, prettily, pausing to go on with her gay chatter. And he thought, "I am a coward not to have told her at once. Why do I feel as if I was plotting a vile act of treachery towards her?"

Suddenly she ceased talking and touched him with her hand.

"Eric, what's up? You don't eat—you don't speak. I'm sure there's something on your mind. What is it?"

Then he began his task.

"Well, it's this. Do you remember you made me promise that if I had any big piece of news—a change in my way of life—"

He stopped short, because the alteration in her aspect was so pitiful, so startling. She had moved one of the candlesticks in order to look at him more closely and she was leaning forward across the little table. Then, as she heard that lame prelude of his, all the light seemed to go out of her face, leaving it hard, cold, lifeless.

"Go on. The news is?" And she spoke in a jerky whisper. "Oh, I can guess it."

"Can you? Fernande, my dear, it is this—" And as he made this postponing echo of his previous words he shrank from and hated the inevitableness of complete disclosure. "I am thinking of getting married."

"To Miss Cornish?"

"Yes. . . . But how do you—"

"Oh, who else could it be? Naturally I'm not surprised. I have expected it for a long time. But thank you for keeping your promise and letting me know. When is the happy event to—to take place?"

"That I can't say. I don't know. It is a plan. But nothing is yet settled. Fernande!"

She had sat right back in her chair and half closed her eyes. She was so deadly pale that he thought she was going to faint.

"It's all right, Eric," she whispered, and he saw a shiver moving her head and shoulders. "Give me a moment, and I'll be sensible. It—it's only just the little shock—not of surprise—but you know." Then presently she leaned forward again, and he saw the struggle that she made to smile at him. "Of course that girl has tried to get you from the very beginning. Well, she has got you now. You—you dear innocent—you didn't see it coming." While she talked now she was not looking at him. She was making movements with her right hand upon the tablecloth, as if pressing a crease out of it. "No, you didn't see it coming—or you wouldn't have left me in the dark, would you?" And she began to laugh softly to herself. "How did the great heiress open your eyes in the end? Did she throw her handkerchief at you, or flop into your arms, or show you an engagement ring that she had bought round the corner and ask you to fit it on? I'm sure it was she who proposed, not you."

"Fernande."

"Yes, I know. What a pig I am!" And in a moment her manner changed, her face softened, her voice grew

kind. "Eric dear, forgive me. I don't mean to be hateful. Miss Cornish, without doubt, is a charming young woman. Heaven knows, you have said so often enough. All the feminine virtues—and the best of good taste too, as she is proving." And now Fernande really smiled at him. She gave him the frank sweet smile that was unlike any other that he had ever known, and stretched out her hand to find his with the old frank gesture of affection. "You don't think I mind? Of course it is splendid news—magnificent—just what I used to pray for. Didn't I always say I *wanted* you to marry—to have a rich wife? How could I possibly say one word against Miss Cornish? This isn't another Daphne. It's wonderfully, stupendously all right. There. From the bottom of my heart I congratulate you, Eric. I'm glad, glad, glad."

"Fernande," he said, swelling with emotion, "you are fine—you are always fine."

"Dear boy." She squeezed his hand and released it.

The waiter came with another dish, dabbed a cutlet on each of their plates, poured sauce on it, added vegetables. She made no pretence of eating any more, but pushed her plate away and continued talking. Neither could he eat.

"Tell me," she said, very quietly, "about your—your sweetheart. Do you love her, Eric? Oh, don't be shy. I want to know."

He answered this and other questions with reluctance, and felt vaguely conscious that now for the first time he was not visualising Ruth as he spoke of her. In the emotions of the last hour Ruth had receded. Ruth had become unsubstantial, almost unreal. No picture rose before him, no definite vivid memories of her aspect pre-

sented themselves. It was as though he talked of a stranger, or of somebody that he knew very slightly. Fernande was filling his thoughts to the exclusion of everything else. His gratitude for her acceptance of the great fact, the sense of her unselfishness and generosity, filled him with the most tender admiration. She had made him happy again. He had told her and she did not mind; for his sake she rejoiced.

Then he realized, with a dreadful qualm, that he had not told her. She had accepted what he never doubted she would accept. But the blow that might shake her and rend her had not been delivered. He felt as if he dared not speak and yet dared not delay in speaking.

Next moment she made delay impossible.

She was saying that after his marriage she would not be exacting, because naturally he would be much less free than now; they would see each other when and how they could; also she did not wish to be asked to the house, not even to big parties, although of course she would love to see him in his grandeur. "But I think it wouldn't be wise, dear—nor safe either. You mustn't hate me for putting it so plainly. But on the whole I think it will be better if I don't know your wife at all."

He told her then, at last, that after his marriage he would be compelled to renounce all meetings with her.

"But why? I don't understand."

Her face had died again in the candlelight; her lips were contracted, and she was breathing fast.

"Why? Is it your future wife who has said that?"

"No."

"Then why have *you* said it?" And she spoke hurriedly and eagerly. "Have you talked of me to her?"

"Oh, no."

"But she knows about me?"

"Yes, she knows about you."

"And she's jealous, I suppose. But she needn't be. Persuade her. Don't let her force you to do anything so —so horribly unkind."

"She is not forcing me."

"You mean you will do it of your own free will? You mean you yourself wish to cut me out of your life altogether?"

"No, I don't wish it. But I am afraid it's inevitable. You see, I shall have other claims."

"And have *I* no claims?"

He could not answer. He felt too mean, too wretched. The sight of her miserable unhappy face, the sharp anguish of her voice, overcame him.

"Very well, Eric. I don't rebel against your decision. How can I? You are the judge—and there is no court of appeal. I—I am at your mercy."

She was wrapping her scarf round her neck. "Pay them," she said abruptly, and she got up from the table. "Be quick. I'm going. I'll wait for you outside."

They walked away side by side. There was no danger of her taking his arm now. She walked with her head down. All the grace and strength of her body seemed to have gone from her, so that as she hurried along she looked like anybody—a shop girl going to catch a train, a woman sent on a humble errand.

"Fernande," he murmured feebly, "I am dreadfully sorry. I'll try to explain—"

"Oh, there's nothing to explain," she said, in a meek submissive voice that affected him with an almost intolerable regret. "It's quite natural. I understand. Besides, you *have* explained. I have told you I submit. Don't be afraid that I may cause you any trouble."

"Fernande."

They walked on without speaking, until suddenly she stopped and uttered an exclamation that was like a cry.

"Eric! You say you are going to Paris to-morrow for a week. Do you mean you don't intend to see me when you come back—that this is the very last time, that it is good-bye now, to-night?"

"Well, when I come back from Paris, I had planned that my new life should begin—if it is ever to begin."

She stood still, raising her head to look at him in the light of a shop window that flooded them both. Then her head sank again and she moved on, but slowly, making queer gestures with her hands. And she talked to him in that piteous little meek voice.

"All right. Quite all right, Eric. You know best. Good-bye, dear; good-bye." And the voice was shaken, broken. "But is it any use prolonging it? I dare say you'll be glad to have it over. There's not much sense in coming with me for more talk. Say good-bye now."

"No, I want to sit with you. I want more talk."

When they reached her rooms she was gentle and calm. After taking off her hat and scarf she busied herself with his comfort. She drew the cheap curtains that she had

bought, lit the gas fire in the sitting-room and in the kitchen, got ready her cups and saucers.

"I'll make you some coffee, dear. Yes, you shan't be cheated of your coffee. You'll smoke, won't you?" And she held a lighted match for him.

There was neither life nor spring in her movements as she went from room to room; her voice had become heavy and toneless; her shoulders seemed to have contracted; she looked small, weak, forlorn. She was like a servant waiting on him—like a dismissed servant still loyally serving the master until he can find another person to take her place.

When she had brought him his coffee she knelt by the gas stove and warmed her hands. While she remained in this position she talked to him, with a firmness very pathetic because of the perceptible effort that it cost her.

"Now, for final words of advice. Fernande in her wisdom must hold forth to the chosen child of fortune. . . . Eric dear, I see you going straight on, never looking behind you, never faltering. You mustn't, you know. Nothing can be too big for you henceforth. . . . Oh, I am glad. Dear boy, I can't tell you that too often. I am glad—and soon I shall be happy. I shall watch you from a distance. They can't object to that"; and her voice broke again. "Of course they'll make you a partner. My Eric will rise from height to height. You'll go into parliament—you'll be made a peer—you'll, you'll—" And she stopped speaking and made those queer gestures with her hands.

"I shall owe everything to you, Fernande—whatever it may be. I'll never forget that."

She rose from her knees and went into the bedroom, saying over her shoulder that she would be back in a moment.

Presently, as she did not return, he called to her; and, as she did not answer, he went into the other room himself.

She was stretched face-downwards on the bed quietly weeping. When he stooped over her and touched her she shivered from head to feet. "I am cold," and she began to sob, so that he could scarcely hear her words. "Please light the fire."

There was a gas stove in here, too, and he lit it. Then he sat beside her on the bed and chafed her hands.

"Thank you, dear. . . . But you had better go. Leave me alone—to have my cry out—and I shall be all right. . . . Oh, Eric—my dear one—my own one." She sat up and folded him in her arms, clinging to him, hiding her face against his breast and sobbing. "Eric, it's more than I can bear."

He sat there holding her to him, feeling once more her slenderness, her smallness, her weakness, and while he touched her soft dark hair, her quivering arm, her cold hand, and tried to comfort her with caresses and whispered words, as one does to an inconsolable child, compassion made his brain ache and burn. He thought of her as she had been when she was really a little child. He thought of the story of her whole life—the mother that was worse than no mother, the pain, the shame; of the drunken husband bringing her disgrace by his senseless clamour, of Cyril with his unspeakable baseness, of all the women who had scorned her, of all the brutes of

men who had used her for their pleasure, degraded her, ill-treated her. Always she had been knocked about, as she said herself; always she had been suffering at the hands of others; and he remembered her cry long ago when first he had spoken harshly to her. "Oh, not you, Eric. Not you too." He held her closer to him—his companion, his sister, his child; and he thought, "I can't bear it either. It shan't be. I must appeal to Ruth, explaining everything. I must tell Cornish that I can't accept his condition; I can't give up my friend. There's no reason why I should. Ruth will agree. It's absolutely innocent."

"Fernande, stop crying. Listen. I have something to say."

But then before he could say it, the full storm of her grief burst upon him.

"Oh, if it means casting me off altogether, don't marry her. Give her up. Don't do it." She was loud, violent, clutching at him. "Think of me—of all I have done for you. Give her up. Think of what *I* have given up—and all for you. I have made you my anchor and my hope. Eric, think. I am poor, dreadfully hard up. I am working like a common drudge—and all because of you. You know that."

"No. How do you mean?"

"Being good," she sobbed; "for your sake—and because I felt it hurt you when I wasn't."

"Fernande, is this true?"

"Of course it's true. Mr. Letronne—all of them—one after another—every one who helped me and would do things for me—they saw that only you counted. I let

them go. And I wouldn't take help from others. I kept myself straight—all for your sake. Even Cyril. Cyril has been thrown over too—for months and months. Then what should I do if I lost you altogether? I should go right down. I should commit suicide. But you say claims! Isn't what I have done a claim upon you?"

She broke from his arms and flung herself down on the bed again.

"Oh, Eric, shoot me. Kill me. Put me out of my misery."

He dared not touch her. He drew back aghast; and she lay writhing, wailing, making him think of a girl who lies face-downwards in the roadway after one has knocked her down with a motor-car or galloped over her on a horse. He was beside himself. The Cornishes, father and daughter, his future and his past, everything for a few minutes went from him. This terrible elemental woe swept all thought away. He spoke to her without thought, instinctively, not knowing what he said.

She did not listen to him, she did not hear him, she only writhed and sobbed, filling the room with the sounds of her anguish.

Then she was up again, clinging to him, but limp and nerveless as she pressed her cold wet face against him. And in another minute the tempest was over.

"Forgive me, Eric. . . . You must marry her. Oh, of course."

"Fernande, I can't, if you feel like this."

"Yes, yes, yes. Oh, it's wicked, wicked, what I was trying to do. I was trying to ruin you"; and she spoke with a sort of despairing calmness. "I—I would sooner

die than injure you. I was justified with Daphne—although I told you lies about her. Daphne loved you—as much as she could. But she would have been fatal to you—so I knew it was right to come between you. I was jealous too—I couldn't help that. Only I swear I didn't act from jealousy. I thought of you, not myself. . . . There. Now I have had my cry. And you needn't worry about me."

"But I must."

"No, dear. I am going to be brave. It's done now. I feel as if all inside me had been torn away"; and once more she sobbed.

Then she begged him to go into the other room. She said she wished to bathe her eyes and make herself tidy.

"I don't want you to remember me as ugly and horrid for the last time. It's not late, is it? You can stay a little longer."

He obeyed, going into the other room and waiting for her to come to him. Time passed and she made no sound.

He had closed the door, but she opened it at last and spoke to him, and he noticed that her voice was firm.

"I have been thinking, Eric— Oh, thinking ever so hard. I have made up my mind. Now I won't keep you long." And she shut the door.

When she opened the door again she did it so softly that he was unaware of her presence. She whispered his name, and he looked up from the sofa where he sat brooding. Then she came to him slowly, with her bare arms outstretched, and stood before him smiling. She had put on one of her oriental wrappers, a flashing glittering thing of scarlet and gold. She dazzled his tired eyes.

"Your hand-maiden has painted her face and loosened her hair. Is she comely, as she used to be, in the great lord's sight?" And she sat beside him and twined an arm about his neck. "Do you understand, my prince? Fernande wants to be yours just for once on your own terms. Listen, darling." She had taken possession of him, she was kissing his face, making him close his eyes beneath her kisses. "I am letting you go to somebody else. I am losing you, but you must give me something. Something I *will* have. Take me with you to Paris. Give me one week—to remember for the rest of my life. And that shall be all. I swear I'll leave you alone afterwards."

"Fernande, how can I? Don't you see I'm bound—"

"Not yet. . . . Stay with me to-night—and we'll talk about it in the morning. One night, Eric, out of all your life"; and she stifled his words with her lips. She held him fast until he had no strength to speak, and then went on whispering to him. "Oh, you know what I am. You needn't have any compunction. I want you. I shan't let you go. Oh, don't be cruel—don't struggle, my angel. It's Fernande. You can't hurt her, you can't break her heart. You can't refuse to love her when she asks you like this."

XVIII

About a week after this Mr. Cornish received a letter from Paris.

"The assurance I gave you was quite justified," wrote Eric Bowen in the course of his letter. *"But I could not give you that assurance now. Circumstances have altered; and I regret to say that I am compelled to resign my position in your employment and to withdraw from all matters in which I have had the honour to be connected with you";* and he went on to say that when he returned to London he would ask permission to visit the house once more, but only for the purpose of arranging such papers as had been in his charge, so that all might be found in order by his successor. To do this, he said, would not take more than a couple of hours.

"I am sorry," wrote Mr. Cornish, in his strong businesslike handwriting. *"It is very unfortunate. But I agree with you that our association must now cease. You had better telephone to Miss Paine and make an appointment for coming here. Nothing could be gained by my seeing you, and therefore I shall not do so."*

That was all.

In due course then Eric stood again in that lofty room where he had worked for so long and with so much happiness, and where he was now to perform his last task and make all things ready for the more fortunate person who was henceforth to occupy it. His papers were not in an

untidy state, but he worked conscientiously, arranging them still more tidily, adding useful notes, and giving Miss Rivers-Paine some valuable instructions.

Miss Paine helped him until he had nearly finished and had sat down at the big table by the window to write his final notes. Then she left him.

Miss Paine had betrayed nervousness as well as wonder. She was alarmed by an upheaval of so devastating a character, perhaps asking herself if any one could feel really safe here, when it was possible for the favourite to fall with such a crash; but being polite as well as sympathetic, she refrained from any questions that were not general in scope.

"All this is very sudden, isn't it, Mr. Bowen?"

"Yes, quite," said Eric in an absent-minded tone.

"And unexpected too?"

"Yes."

"Now," said Miss Paine, "if I can't be of any further use I'll say good-bye"; and as she shook hands with him she betrayed that particular and unusual interest which this young man, whether for good or evil, infallibly aroused in all members of her sex with whom he consorted for any length of time. "Mr. Bowen, you mayn't know it, but you're looking wretchedly ill. Now you are free for a bit, I believe you ought to give yourself a real good restful holiday."

Eric thanked her, smiled at her, and said he had just had a holiday of more than a fortnight.

His smile did not gladden Miss Paine, it made her sad. Leaving him she thought, as many other people were presently to be thinking, "What *has* happened to get him into

such awful disgrace with Mr. Cornish? And how will our young lady like his being bundled out at this short notice? She won't like it at all—unless I am mistaken."

It was the afternoon, and soon the autumn twilight began to fall. The great house seemed unnaturally silent; not a voice sounded, not a movement; he did not even hear doors being opened and closed. He had a feeling that everything had been silenced on his account. People had gone away in order to leave the house empty for him; and nothing could be done, ordinary decent life could not be resumed, until he had relieved the house of his objectionable presence. Well, he would be gone now, never to trouble it again.

His work finished, he stood by the table for a minute or two looking out at the view—that view which, when he first saw it, had impressed him with its suggestions of grandeur and power.

As he turned from the window Cornish came into the room. Cornish had said that he would not see him, but now he was here.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself?"

He had put his hands in his pockets as if to avoid the possibility that Eric might offer to shake hands with him, and he went to the hearth and stood there with his back to the fire. He looked gloomy and depressed, unhappy too, but he spoke sharply, repeating his question in fewer words.

"Anything to tell me?"

"Very little—except that I forgot to mention I have of course resigned my directorships."

"Was that necessary? . . . Yes, I suppose it was. . . .

And how do you think you're going to get on without them?"

"Oh, I shall do all right."

"Will you? I wonder. And your shares?"

"I am selling them."

"How much will that give you?"

"About five thousand pounds."

"I should stick to that, if I were you. Yes, I should stick to that money like grim death. Remember what I said about capital. Keep it till you find an opening."

"Yes, I mean to."

"And how do you suppose you're going to live meantime?"

"Oh, I can always earn a living."

"Can you?" Then, after a pause Cornish took his hands out of his pockets and waved them above his head. "Yes, there goes your luck and my dream." And for the first time Eric heard him use oaths. Often as he had been noisy and even violent in language he had never till now sworn. "Oh, why have you been such a fool? That's what it amounts to. I'm disappointed. I'm sick with disappointment. I believed in you. I believed in your luck. Luck's a marvellous thing. And now you've messed it away." He did not in fact say "messed"; he used a much stronger and more vulgar word. "And, by Jupiter, the luck won't forgive you. My prototype indeed! . . . Oh, women are the devil."

He brandished his arms, paced to and fro, then returned to his station on the hearth-rug.

"Look here, Bowen"; and his manner changed. It became quiet, careless, almost offensive. "Since it's come

to this, that I'm glad to be rid of you, perhaps you'll expect something from me by way of solatium."

"Certainly not," said Eric warmly.

"A few thousands—in cash—to make up for your loss of salary and other prospects? I mean as a present, a gratuity."

Eric, wounded, and flushing hotly, said that he would not take a penny. Then, seeing the expression of Cornish's face, he added, "But I suppose you are saying this to put me to a test. Surely it wasn't needed."

Cornish was rubbing his chin. "Yes," he said, "that was exactly what I was doing. Testing you. I shouldn't have thought of it three weeks ago. But they say when a fellow breaks faith and does what you have done his character goes to pieces pretty quick. . . . Well, there's no more to be said"; and he began to curse again. "Oh, hell! Why did I ever take a fancy to you? Why did I take pity on you and try to rescue you from all that scum? They say if you pull a drowning man out of the water he'll do you an injury sooner or later. Well, you have done me a damned awful injury, Eric Bowen, and whether by accident or intention doesn't make much difference. Anyhow, you must sink or swim by yourself now. Our job in this house is to forget you."

XIX

Two-thirds of a year had gone by.

In the pleasant weather of a late Easter the town of Boulogne was full of pleasure-seekers: visitors for the day, clerks, shop-girls, mechanics, and those who stayed longer, honest middle-class families taking the cheapest available continental holiday. Everything was done to make them happy. The casino had temporarily opened its doors; flags, religious processions, and some sort of minor festival among the fisher-folk made the quays and harbour a place of gaiety and excitement in which ordinary business with its truck loads of fish, its shoutings, and its acrid odours, was conducted under difficulty; the popular confectioners in the Rue Faidherbe had engaged extra girls to cope with its afternoon rush of foreign patrons.

This afternoon at tea-time the whole shop was blocked with the crowd of British tourists. They clamoured in their native tongue for seats and food. A few smart French people were submerged by them. They pushed, they strove. But in the midst of them stood a couple quite different from the rest—a good-looking but rather care-worn young man and a tall slim woman, who was dressed as well and wearing her garments as charmingly as any of the French people. These two were noticeable for their good manners as much as for their attractive ap-

pearance. They did not hurry or push. They waited with well-bred patience.

Presently, however, the young man found places at a table for himself and his lady. Speaking in French, he ordered tea, to be followed with ices, and the lady smiled at his laboriously perfect accent. Without having observed the smile of amusement he sat down beside her.

It was Eric Bowen, with all that was left to him in the abominable fiasco he had made of his life—Fernande.

This was their first treat or excursion since the fatal fortnight in Paris. Now, with his circumstances improving, he was just able to afford the cost of it.

He had passed through a dark time, with disappointment as his daily portion and humiliating recollections as the fabric of his dreams at night. He had believed that he would be able to choose congenial employment, and he could not find any employment at all. Rochester and its various cement factories would not have him; the City did not want him either; the very people who had begged him to come to them unhesitatingly refused him. They loved him while he was with Cornish; they were afraid of him as a person who had left Cornish. Even Miss Barrett of *Beautiful Houses* raised her eyebrows and declined the risk of offence to Mr. Cornish in engaging his late lieutenant. He worked then with hands and arms, once again becoming a unit in the market of casual labour, and maintaining the comfort of the person who was dependent on him by the sale of his personal belongings. This struggle continued, with a horrible depression of spirits to be fought against as well as the hardness of the world, until at last he fell in with work at an advertisement agent's

firm. Nothing perhaps could be better evidence of his endurance and tenacity than the fact that he retained his little capital untouched and ready for use. He was still looking for an opening that never came.

"Voilà, monsieur."

The bustling over-driven waitress brought the tea, and he talked French again, and again Fernande smiled. He saw the smile this time, and it warmed his heart. It was a signal that her fretful mood had passed. He smiled too, and asked her in effect if their squabble was over.

"Yes," she said, "I am all right, if *you* are all right, Eric."

"Of course I am."

She looked at him piteously. "Not wishing me dead, as you did this morning?"

He winced and looked away from her.

Then she touched his hand, and whispered, "I am sorry. Darling, forgive me. Say it's all right."

"Yes," he whispered. "But why will you say these things?"

They were the things that tortured him, that threw him back into those depths of shame and regret from which he had emerged so slowly. They were the things that made him want to commit suicide, because they seemed to show that all he had suffered, all he had borne without flinching, was a vain sacrifice.

She had given up everything for him; but he had given up everything for her. He had thought, "It is a debt that I am paying, and I will pay it to the full. If I fail, my failure will be complete indeed." Moreover he had vowed to make her happy.

It was not easy. It was almost impossible. One day she spoke of her happiness, and the next she told him she was miserable. From the very first, with the altered relations of these two people, there had been destructive elements, disintegrating pressures, and a strain so continuous in accommodating their circumstances to the surrounding facts as to preclude the likelihood of any real peace. To begin with they were both a prey to remorse. His remorse was for the harm that he had done to other people; hers was for the harm she had done to him. Eric was strong enough to try to hide his trouble of mind, if not quite able to succeed. Fernande had never attempted to keep silence.

After the disaster she had implored him to leave her and go back to Cornish, concealing the lapse or asking forgiveness. She would not believe it was too late to retrieve the position. She refused to allow any weight to Eric's notions of honour. Then when he had written his letter to Cornish, she uttered her forlorn despairing cry: "I have ruined you. My love has ruined you." Her bitter self-reproaches broke out again and again. They became the chorus to their almost tragic drama. His endless task was to reassure her, to appease her. "Say that you still think it worth while. Oh, Eric, if you are sorry, for God's sake drop me and be done with it. I can't go on unless I'm sure of you."

The next phase was her doubt. Once so frank and free, never being offended, liking a little chaff, she developed a terrible sensitiveness. She watched his face and misinterpreted its expression; she who used to divine his thoughts now read them wrong. Sometimes if for a mo-

ment he looked grave she protested, if he was merry she upbraided him for hardness of heart. "Why don't you say it, Eric, in words? You have turned against me. I am an incubus. You are thinking that, but for me, you would be free and independent, rich and happy." And in her distress, her anguish, she spoke cruelly sometimes. Within a few minutes she passed through a storm of angry words and tears, despairing cries, insults, to abject prayers for pardon, hysterically fervent reconciliations, smiles, and again tears.

Yet, as he knew, beneath it all there was a devotion that never changed. He did not lose patience. He understood. In his treatment of her he was brave, not cowardly.

But during these disturbing scenes, especially of late, he was haunted with the recollection of some horrible words of Cyril's. They were an odious prophecy uttered by Cyril with an accompaniment of chuckling laughter. "Do you quarrel with her?" Cyril had said. "Does she nag at you? Not yet, eh? But she will, old boy. She'll do it more and more. She'll take you up and down with her, up and down, and before you are finished she'll wear you out. She'll just wear you out."

Everything had been against them. Showing an unexpected timidity, she shrank from publishing the full truth of their situation. Perhaps it would have been scarcely possible for them to live together openly. She was known to too many people as Mrs. Faulkner to allow of her calling herself Mrs. Bowen. Even the ladies of that shabby artistic society to which she still clung would have objected to a change as unauthorised as it was sud-

den. Thus they were lovers, but not companions. They met by stealth. The morning light in hired rooms had seen their kisses and farewells; they had paid for the joy of being together with humiliating devices and unworthy pretences; bills for a night's lodging, had he kept them, would have filled the sort of album that more fortunate lovers tenderly garnish with mementos of the time when their love was young.

Certainly she suffered less than he did under the restraints that she had imposed. Accustomed to tricks and shams, inured to submission, gently callous to a particular form of contempt, she did not feel the repugnances that made him wretched. Nothing in life had taught her that love is its highest glory, and that it cannot safely be dealt with as an ailment to be discreetly hidden until it has run its course.

Now the brief holiday at Boulogne was to make up for so much. She had looked forward to it, they had counted the days to its beginning, they had prayed for fine weather; and yet this morning, their first morning, with the sun shining from an unclouded sky, she had quarrelled with him. Once more he had inadvertently wounded her. Or rather she had wounded herself, by giving a distorted sense to unconsidered words, by imputing to him an unkindness of which he was incapable.

But he had been forgiven. In her childish phrase, the phrase that she used at every reconciliation or every renewal of her confidence, it was all right.

They talked then gaily, he perhaps making conversation, but she with a dozen different subjects coming unsearched for to her quick-moving lips. It was as it used

to be in the old time. She enjoyed this little feast in the crowded shop, the sound of all the voices, the queer shouts and noises that came from the street, with its passing trams, its enormous lumbering carts, its faces that looked in through the window, laughed, and vanished. Within and without, the spirit of holiday was in the air. Not to be joyous would be criminal at such a time, in such a place. For a little while it was absolutely all right.

"Eric dear, I believe I am going to make pots of money at the casino to-night. Oh, you may trust me. I won't go a franc beyond what you have given me. I mean I won't ask for any more. And, listen, if I *am* lucky, I shan't run my banks. I shall try to win three times, and then let it pass. . . . I shall wear my new red hat. I tell you, I intend to look extremely nice. . . . The women who win at chemin-de-fer are always very smart or absolute old frumps. . . . Oh, there's the man with the papers. Do buy one."

He went to the door, waited his turn there, and came back with a copy of *The Daily Mail* and *The Times*. The man was besieged by eager purchasers. These people who had read yesterday's morning paper in London, who as yet had not been on continental soil for twenty-four hours, were already thirsting for news of their island home.

"Choose," he said, smiling at her.

"Well, I know you like *The Times*."

"You mean you want *The Daily Mail*. Take it."

She looked first at the pictures on the back page, making ejaculations, protesting at the excesses of the camera, saying that the libel law ought to be amended in order to bring snap-shot photographers within its grip. Then,

after lighting a cigarette, she glanced at the other pages, talking to him, reading the headlines aloud, and one or two extracts.

"Eric, this is rather funny. A letter from a woman who has had her Persian cat stolen"; and she read.

But now he was not listening. Having unfolded *The Times,* he was reading it here and there. And all at once he gave a little start, read a short paragraph for the second time, and then slowly refolded the paper and laid it down.

"'*I had taken the precaution of buttering my cat's paws.*'" Fernande was laughing as she read. "Eric, do you hear?"

He sat with his hands clasped on the table, looking at her, but not listening to her, not even seeing her. His face was grave and sad, the lips firmly set.

She stopped reading and watched him.

"Eric, what's the matter? What have I done to offend you?"

He roused himself.

"Shall we go now?" he said. "Have you finished?"

"No," she said sharply, still looking at him. "Tell me first what has upset you. Was it something in the paper? Yes, I know it was. You have seen something in the paper. Give it me. Show it me"; and she snatched at *The Times* and pulled it open again.

"There is nothing there that can interest you." And he asked her again to come away, but she would not. With a sort of feverish haste she was searching the pages. He left her, to go to the counter and pay for their cakes, and when he returned to the table, her eyes were cold,

her whole manner was hostile. She had found what she looked for. It was a paragraph among the Court news. She read it to him in a low voice, but bitingly, mockingly.

" 'The marriage of Lord Alderstown and Miss Cornish will take place very quietly on the fifteenth of May. Owing to a bereavement in the bridegroom's family there will be no reception after the ceremony.' "

"Fernande, come, please," said Eric, with a hardness of which he was unconscious.

"Oh, don't vent your displeasure on me," she said mockingly. "Poor Eric! It was the shock of it, I suppose"; and she laughed. "You were prepared for the gloomy fact, but the actual date knocked you over."

"Fernande, I ask you not to say any more."

"What! Can't you bear it even to be mentioned? But I'm sympathising with you—I'm condoling with you. My heart is bleeding for you."

Then she tossed the paper to the floor contemptuously, sprang to her feet, and followed him through the still crowded shop.

They walked along the main street, and then up the gentle slope past the market place, the old church, and through the crowd that waited near there to take by storm the yellow trams as soon as the female conductor in her black uniform gave a permissive signal for the assault. As arranged, they were going up to the old town. Eric loved the old town. He offered his arm and she accepted this aid as they climbed the steps by the gatehouse.

She dropped his arm when they emerged upon the pathway on top of the walls. As they sauntered round them

he talked to her, making conversation again, and she answered him absent-mindedly or not at all.

"How quiet it is up here," he said, after a silence.

On their left hand they had glimpses of old stone buildings and could look down into narrow streets, silent and empty, with here and there a white balcony, a green shutter, a thick-leaved vine. On their right lay the roofs of the lower town, the river with its curved railway bridges, the masts of ships and bright coloured funnels, the outer port, the sea.

They sat on a seat beneath budding plane trees.

Faintly from the harbour one could hear the whistle of the Folkestone boat. At this distance it made only a gentle vibration in the soft air. Presently the sound came again, and he told her that it was the voice of the excursion steamer and not the mail boat. It was calling all the hundreds of day-trippers from different parts of the town.

"Will the ordinary mail-boats run to-morrow?" she asked coldly.

"Oh, yes, of course."

"Then I wish you would find out for me the time of the first boat in the morning, because I think I shall go back in it."

"Fernande."

He looked at her despairingly; he pleaded with her to be reasonable, not to give way to foolish temper, not to spoil their holiday, the poor little holiday that was to have made them so happy; but she told him that it was he who had spoilt everything.

"Oh, my dear boy, it's pretty obvious, isn't it?" She had become very white and she breathed fast, with emo-

tion rising, strengthening, every moment, although plainly she struggled hard to repress it and to maintain the scornful cynical tone that she had adopted. "You needn't apologize. We can none of us be blamed for our feelings. So there we are," and she gave a shaky little laugh. "I am nothing to you really. You can't truly want me, when the sight of somebody else's name in print is enough to make you forget my very existence. No, you won't miss me. You—you'll be glad to be rid of me. Then you can finish your infernal holiday by yourself much more comfortably." She was getting violent, being carried away by the storm she had herself blown into force. Her face was ugly. "When I'm gone, you can sit and brood over your lost lady-love—yes, and take out her sweet photograph and weep over it. I suppose you have got her photograph. You carry it about with you, no doubt, hidden in your pocket-book next your heart."

"Fernande, I warn you—"

But he could not stop her. She went on with a hard cold furiousness.

"Oh, yes, I'll be off to-morrow morning—and I'll take on the first man I meet in London. Or I'll pick up some one at the casino to-night. I tell you I won't stand it any longer. If you aren't loyal to me, I won't be loyal to you."

"But I am loyal. You know it. For God's sake shut up. Keep quiet."

She would not be quiet. She laughed at him, she went on talking.

"And don't forget there's always old Cyril. Cyril would take me back at any time—and only too glad.

Cyril doesn't mind damaged goods. He isn't stuffed up with some pattern of female virtue, and always comparing me with her to my disadvantage, as you do. Yes, you do, Eric—and I think it's beastly and cruel of you. Cyril's a liar and a cheat—but he has some pity."

"Fernande—"

"But I'll set you free. I'll do something that'll give you no choice, Eric—and, as I tell you, you'll be glad. You'll say to yourself, 'She had her chance, but she wasn't worthy of it. I tried to reclaim and reform her, but she relapsed into improper behaviour; so I had to cut her adrift.' "

"Fernande, be careful."

He had stood up, and he put his hands on her shoulders and looked down at her as if about to shake her. He had no such intention. He did not know what he was doing.

"As to that girl—" and her anger blazed. "I hate her. I hate her. Yes, as to your Ruth Cornish—well, I hope Lord Fitznoodle, Lord Poopstick, or whatever his name is, will put her across his knees and spank her. I hope he'll hit her with his fists, and trample on her with his feet, and treat her like the dirt that she is."

"Fernande, if you say one word more, I'll never speak to you again."

He left her sitting on the seat and she watched him as he walked away, her anger fading with every step that he took. She was afraid. After going about a hundred yards he stopped and stood by the parapet of the wall, with his elbows on it and his head lowered. She followed him and presently stood beside him.

"Eric," she murmured caressingly; and as he did not answer or turn towards her she took hold of his arm and gently pulled at it.

Suddenly he turned, seized both her hands and held them tightly. His face was as white as hers had been just now; he seemed to be trembling; and his voice was high-pitched and unnatural.

"Cyril said you would wear me out. Are you trying to do it? What devil possesses you? Can't you see that you'll drive me mad if you don't stop? Why will you torture me and yourself too with this insane jealousy of the past?"

"How can I help being jealous? And *is* it past?" The ever-ready tears filled her eyes; she was piteous, appealing. "Eric, be fair. Torture! You don't know how it tortures me. I wouldn't mind if you were only pining for that girl's money and all she would have brought you. I hate myself still for making you lose it. But it isn't that. It's *her* you pine for."

"That's not true."

"It *is* true. Let go of my hands. You're hurting me. Perhaps you don't admit it to yourself. But of course I see it—of course you can't hide it from me—loving you as I do. You let out your secret in a dozen different ways. Oh, be fair. Don't pretend. You must know very well that you are always thinking of her."

This was no ordinary quarrel. It had shaken the nerves of both, and although he made one overture towards peace the usual reconciliation did not come. Nevertheless their

evening was outwardly successful, hour after hour of noise, light, and factitious gaiety, an evening spent with common people in a common way. They had danced at the casino. Fernande had worn her new red hat, and had won a little money. Very late at night, after she had gone upstairs to bed, Eric went out again by himself.

Was it true, what she had said, that he was always thinking of Ruth?

At any rate he was thinking of her now as he walked away from the hotel along the deserted quay; and sadness wide as the sea, gloom darker than the night, fell upon his spirit. He thought of Ruth and that other world in which he had forfeited his place as completely as if he had gone out of it by dying instead of by being merely disgraced and banished. To remember anybody he had known among those others, or anything that had happened while he was with them, necessarily meant thinking of Ruth. She represented all that he had respected in it—honesty, strength, kindness, candour.

Except Fernande, no one ever spoke to him either of her or her father. He heard of them only as to-day through the public press. Thus some months ago he had learnt of her return from France, and a little later of her engagement to Lord Alderstown. Now, in a month's time, he would read of her wedding. It would be in the newspapers on the sixteenth of May. "*Yesterday, at the church of All Saints,*" and so on.

She might have been his own wife, and she was to be the wife of that blameless nobleman, that incarnation of correct demeanour and polite mediocrity, that solemn vacuous donkey. She did not care for him. It was im-

possible. At best, habit, time, the dulling influence of pursuits shared in common, would enable her to feel and to sustain a lukewarm regard for him. But she was marrying him only because her confidence had been betrayed by the man she had honoured with her real love. She was doing it as even the strongest and best girls will do desperate things when they have been rendered miserable or have lost their ideals.

"But for me," he thought, "she would not have consented, no matter how great the pressure that was brought to bear upon her. I have spoilt her life, just as I have spoilt my own. She trusted me and I played her false." And he thought of their last interview, of the moment when she stood with her hand in his and called him by his name. Yes, she had offered herself to him then, nobly and simply, believing that he was honest and good, and that he loved her. It was a betrothal. If it had been done before an altar it could not have been more binding on him.

And with shame as bitter as when he first felt it, he thought of what had happened directly afterwards. In imagination he heard Cornish telling her of his unworthiness. . . . "Our task, Ruth, is to forget him. . . ." A curtain fell, a door closed, and he was shut out.

Then he thought of Fernande; still loyal to her in his compassion, firm in his purpose, but without hope.

He understood, too well, that their lapse had been as fatal to her as to him. She had held him with the strength of the spirit, and her power was gone when she began to hold him with the weakness of the flesh. Their friendship had been noble and good, and she had lifted herself, puri-

fied herself, in resolutely keeping it pure; but their love, the physical union, had been humiliating and degrading. It had lowered her. It should have come when they first met, or never. They had thrown away self-respect as well as self-control when after that immense delay he fell with her, commonly, ignominiously, as a half drunk man falls in the muddy street, by accident.

All that she had once said to him of passionate sensual love, as between her and him, had miserably fulfilled itself. "Even the new feelings would become weak—everything would disappear at last. . . . The fire burns low, then blazes up again. It does that a lot of times, Eric, and then it goes out."

He struggled against this and later memories. Together they had fallen; but they must rise together. If only they could escape from the sordidness of their present existence!

The thought of sordidness inevitably reminded him of Cyril. He had injured Cyril. Not the least part of his remorse had been in regard to Cyril; for, whatever Cyril's villainies, he had never treated Eric badly. He had been fond of him; he was one more person who had trusted him and been betrayed. If Cyril had abused him, he would have listened meekly; if Cyril had struck him, he would have accepted blows without defending himself; if Cyril had publicly denounced him, he would not have protested. But Cyril had crowned his humiliations in showing a conscienceless magnanimity. Cyril had taken a horrible revenge by forgiving him.

Not at once, but very soon. He never answered Eric's letter of confession. He refused to give him an interview.

When by a mere chance they met in the street, Cyril cut him, made an impressive gesture on Eric's addressing him, and walked away, swaggering.

Then he abruptly stopped, turned, and called to Eric.

"Hold hard. I want to speak to you. . . . Damn it, why not? Come in here, and we'll have a drink and talk about it."

He led Eric into a common public-house, past a noisy tap-room to a narrow room called the saloon bar, where he was greeted by the attendant young woman as a well-known patron of the establishment. Indeed he had left it only a few minutes ago. They sat there, wrapped round with tobacco smoke and alcoholic odours; and Cyril drank, at Eric's expense, and talked. He was cynically philosophic at first, and then in spite of himself showed strong feeling. His slightly blood-shot eyes, his unshaven chin, the appalling dirtiness of his tie and collar, together with the abject background of the bar counter and the blowsy girl behind it, formed a picture that Eric would never forget. Nor would he ever fail to recall, against his will, the horrible things to which eventually he was forced to listen.

"It's not your fault," said Cyril, with a shrug of his lean shoulders. "I know that, well enough. So here's luck"; and he raised his glass. "Bit by bit she took possession of you, till you couldn't call your soul your own."

Vainly Eric protested.

"She's the one to blame, not you. I own I never expected that you would take her from me. I thought it was safe. And it would have been—with anybody else. But she cares for you more than she has ever cared for

anybody—except me, in the beginning. Don't run away with any mistake. She was devilish fond of me, Eric. Of course I don't know what yarns she has pitched you." And he laughed harshly; and then almost at once his emotion became perceptible. "I was everything to her at first. I understood her. Nobody else ever has. Not you, my lad. You're a hundred miles away from really fathoming her. She *acts* to you. She suited me temperamentally, and *I* suited her—that is, till you came along and gradually changed everything. Oh, I know. The game's plain to me. If you had meant business—if you had really gone for her—you would never have got her. I told you so before you started"; and he had a kind of outburst of fierce accusation.

Eric could not silence him, could not avoid hearing.

"Her way with men is to take everything and give nothing. She's an *allumeuse*—you know what that is. She's a teaser, a nerve-exciter. She's that and nothing else by nature—and she brought it to a fine art. When she was only fourteen—a minx with her hair in a plait—she upset grown men, drove them wild. She has told me so herself. Oh, she didn't mince matters with me," and he gave another unmirthful laugh.

The odious little scene closed characteristically by his borrowing money—not much, only the loose change that Eric happened to have at the moment.

He borrowed more later on. He remained in their lives as a person who had been grievously wronged and refused to nourish resentment, a shabby sinister figure showing itself and disappearing again, an embodiment of that degradation which for Eric made the whole of his world so

ugly. But lately he had been merciful, relieving them of his presence. Fernande said he had gone to Monte Carlo "with his gang" to try a system, and that perhaps they would never see him again, for he had made plans to visit South America and would not return to England on his way there.

The gardens of the casino were all dark, with lamps alight only at the gates, where a weary custodian paced to and fro. Everybody had gone home except a few people in the baccarat room. Long since, the last of the trams had jolted away past the Custom House. The roadways, the quays, the port itself, seemed lifeless.

Eric walked slowly back to the hotel, one of those small French houses beside the harbour. An elderly grey-haired chambermaid admitted him to the entrance passage, and as she lit a candle told him grumblingly that her vigil was not ended by his arrival, for the numbers sixteen and twenty were still out. The humble establishment did not like late hours, no night-porter was kept, and the frugal landlord turned off the electric light at twelve o'clock.

Upstairs the candlelight showed Eric a typical French bedroom of the poorer kind—bare floor-boards and frayed mats, hideous wall paper with stains and torn patches, a high bed of common varnished wood. The appearance of the room was not improved by its untidy condition. The inevitable feather quilt had been thrown down upon the floor; parts of Fernande's costume hung on the end of the bed; her red hat ornamented a curtain peg; a stocking trailed across the toilet table beside her stays, her

hand-bag, and a glass vase with the spray of lilies of the valley that he had bought for her as a peace-offering just before dinner. Those minute white blossoms alone spoke of beauty, romance, the days that used to be.

He had entered the room very softly, and he held his open hand as a shade to the candle flame, keeping its light from the bed. But she was awake.

"At last," she murmured plaintively. "Eric, it's the middle of the night."

"Then why aren't you asleep?"

"How can I sleep till you have forgiven me and told me it's all right? I have been so miserable. I thought you must have gone to drown yourself because of my hatefulness."

She swept the hair away from her white face and held out her arms towards him.

"Fernande is sorry. Isn't that enough?"

When he came to her, she clasped his neck and dragged his face down to hers.

"Eric, you aren't really unhappy about that girl? No, I know you aren't. But I love you so dreadfully that I would like to murder everybody you have ever looked at. Say you'll make allowances. Oh, Eric, swear you are not tired of me. Swear you'll never throw me over. I couldn't live—I simply couldn't live without you. . . . There! Is it all right?"

He had to say yes, it was quite all right again.

XX

It seemed now that a little of the luck which had been his in such large quantities was coming back to him. The business of his employers—an advertisement firm of minor repute in Fleet Street—had greatly expanded, and with the increase of work his own emoluments were rapidly rising. He was able to do more for Fernande. He took her away from lodgings that were even worse than those rooms above the chiropodist and found her comfortable accommodation in the north of London near the large cheap hotel where he himself permanently occupied a room on the sixth floor. Except for a preoccupation which he struggled to obliterate in the fatigue of harder and harder work he was in better spirits than at any time since his disaster.

With his working capital safe behind him, he was still a solid person. That opening for which he looked must present itself sooner or later. Then he would grasp at it boldly, and begin another upward course. It was too late to conquer the world, as he had originally intended, but at least he might establish himself in a position of moderate success.

Fernande's fortunes were on the mend too. She had been engaged by one of the small magazines for women, and once again she bustled about to picture galleries, dress shows, and charity bazaars, gathering material for her bright and chatty articles. The work kept her occu-

pied and contented, and Eric encouraged her with ceaseless praise. There had not been another quarrel, not even any misunderstandings.

Whenever possible, after her busy day, she used to come and meet him at the closing hour of his office. If the weather was fine, she waited for him in the Temple gardens. Making their way northward through the streets, they walked home together like hundreds of other couples —husbands and wives, sweethearts, or mere business allies. After a meal in the hotel grill-room, or at one of the cheap restaurants of the neighbourhood, they strolled about again, or went into a cinema theatre. They were of the unnumbered people—not noticed by anybody—never meeting an acquaintance. He escorted her back to her lodgings, and they parted, to meet again next day.

Then, quite unexpectedly, his advertisement firm asked if he would care to bring some money into their business and become a partner. They said they had thought of making this offer for some time because his power of organisation as well as his industry had impressed them most favourably. Above all, they could trust him to play the game, and not let them down with any of the nasty selfish tricks that were, alas, far too common in Fleet Street. This last compliment really did him good. A very small bone is welcome to a disgraced and famished dog. His spirits rose again. He asked for time to consider the proposal, but he knew that he would not accept it. He must find something better and more substantial before risking capital.

But he debated the matter at length with Fernande. That evening they went to no entertainment—they talked

and talked and talked. Fernande was full of excitement, cheering him with her sympathy and interest, and giving him that final support which all men, whether they know it or not, desire from the woman who is advising them—that is, a confirmation of their own previously settled opinion. Fernande agreed that the opportunity was not good enough.

"But, Eric, doesn't it show—well, doesn't it show—" Her eyes were bright. She was eager, enthusiastic, as she used to be—rejoicing in the appreciation of her Eric.

He told his firm that he would prefer to remain with them merely as a salaried assistant, and they said they would be glad to keep him on any terms.

The swift weeks had brought him near now to that date which was the basis or central point of those thoughts of his which were in no way connected with business affairs. He could not help thinking of it. Perhaps the date in passing would carry his preoccupation with it and set all his mind free. He hoped so.

They were less than a week from it when something occurred to disturb him grievously.

Without a word of warning Fernande went away from London. They had arranged to meet as usual, the weather was fine, but she failed to keep the appointment. He went to her lodgings, and heard there that she had left early in the morning, taking a suit-case and telling the landlady that she might not be back for a few days. She had given no message for Eric. He felt worried and anxious, with memories, doubts, suspicions, assailing him.

Then by the last post of the day he received a pencil

note from her, a scrawl written at Waterloo Station. It did not render him more comfortable. It told him little more than he had heard from her landlady. She merely said that she had been called away and would return as soon as possible.

He tried in vain to banish his suspicions. Two days, three days, passed by without further tidings of her. What could he think, what reasonable explanation could he find for her absence? It was too like one of those mysterious disappearances in the past, when suddenly she was lost to him and for many days and weeks even he suffered, smarting with shame, torn by jealousy; when he saw Cyril careless and unperturbed, and hated him for not guarding her; when he dreaded to know the ugly truth, and yet could not help guessing it. As suddenly as she had gone she used to reappear, explaining nothing, apologising for nothing, forcing him at her will to submit to pain, to accept humiliation. With her smiles and gentle caresses and subtle charms she won him back to his bondage. With a gesture, a laugh, a half significant word, she reminded him that he had no right to question her. They were two good friends; but that was all. If his face remained sombre and she divined his thoughts, as she was able to do in that bygone time, she chattered of trivial things, she talked faster and faster. If, as once had happened, he dared to utter a plain interrogation, she silenced him, she cowed him, by bursting into tears.

With such experiences behind him, with his unhappy knowledge of her life, how could he prevent himself from again suspecting her?

But she made him ashamed of his suspicion. He felt a

wretch as he read the letter that came to him on the morning of the fourth day. She wrote now from an inn at Salisbury.

"Eric darling, I have come here to be with poor Dick Sandford. He is in a Home here, desperately ill, and he wanted to see me; so of course I had to come. He is more than ill, he is dying. Oh, why does one always shirk that word? It is as if by saying it one were acting treacherously, as if one were giving up the fight on behalf of another, as if acceptance of the adverse verdict could make any difference. It can make no difference to Dick. I do not rob him of a chance of living by saying he will die.

"Your F. will come back to you as soon as she decently may. Meantime, can you send me a few pounds to go on with?"

Her phantom husband! For so long he had been merely the once heard sound of a voice. Eric had not even known his name until that day at Folkestone when for the first time she mentioned it. Since then she had not spoken of him again; but she had continued to aid him. Now and then, when she had asked for money, Eric knew that it was required for this purpose; and sometimes he had thought of the man, still a shadowy, unreal personage in relation to the present day, but strangely solid and alive as he had been many years ago. The picture created by Fernande's description presented itself now—the good-natured, hard-riding, hard-drinking young man who was nobody's enemy but his own, who, with all his failings, had been very kind to her in the beginning. She had said

that she must always remember his kindness, and she had done so. It was good of her to be faithful to this early memory.

And now at last the real man together with the imagined man was ceasing to be. Eric thought very deeply of all that this implied. She would no longer be a married woman. Her husband's death would remove all bars and impediments to her making a legitimate avowable union with anybody else.

His musings on the possibility of marriage brought into active life those suppressed thoughts of another wedding. The date had come close upon him.

On this day, the fifteenth of May, the date of Ruth's wedding, it happened that there was very little work to do. He read the newspapers, looking for what he had lately expected to see; but there was no further announcement, no paragraph describing the presents or reporting that somebody's house had been lent them for the honeymoon. Doubtless the bereavement that had been previously spoken of precluded public notice as well as large festivities. They would be married "very quietly"—that was the word—yet, as one might suppose, at the usual time and in the usual way.

He contrived to keep busy all the morning, but by noon a complete lull set in at the office. He went out, visited printers, engravers, an artist, filling his time somehow.

As he came along the Strand after a long round, the clock at the Law Courts told him that it was half-past two. It was the hour. Ruth was at the church—or just arrived

there. In imagination he could see it all. No crowd. Just a knot of idle people standing to gape at the church door as the motor cars drive up and discharge the few close relatives or the intimate friends of the two families.

The bridegroom is of course already inside the church waiting for her. He stands in the chancel—correct, dignified, dressed with sober propriety in a manner that does honour to the occasion, and yet gives no hint of unfeelingness in one who, as the newspapers stated, has lately suffered a bereavement. And near him is the best man—outwardly as correct as himself, and no doubt inwardly too, or the blameless Lord Alderstown would not have invited his support. Another peer probably! "Now stand back," says the policeman outside. There is a policeman, although, as announced, it is such a very quiet wedding.

"Yes, here she comes! This must be the bride." One of those big well-remembered cars draws up by the red carpet, and Cornish helps his daughter to alight. It is but a glimpse, and she has entered the building. A figure in white, with a veil and a wreath, her face not visible, but sunlight touching her pretty hair.

Eric turned abruptly into one of the dark entries of the Temple, and walking slowly through the courts, with his hands clasped behind his back, went down to the river. Near the gates he found an empty seat, and sat there for half an hour.

He had said to himself, "At three o'clock it will be over. I will think of her till then, and afterwards I will never think of her again."

He could see her face now, and it was calm and still, with no tremor of the lips, no trouble in the eyes. She

seemed to be looking at him peeringly, questioningly, and while the vision lasted his heart throbbed and ached.

"I wish her happiness," he whispered. "I wish her happiness—happiness—and again happiness."

He was cleansing his heart of its last selfish regrets. It had been a vain and wicked thought that she was marrying Lord Alderstown without really caring for him. She was too strong and good to marry a man that she did not love, or that she did not feel sure of soon loving. And why not? He forced himself to think of Alderstown's manifold virtues. Alderstown was high-minded, unpretentious, and no doubt kind. He would give her much—a thousand times more than any humble person could give her—wide interests, useful connections, the charm of stately old-world houses. He was in all respects worthy. They would have children, and she would grow fonder and fonder of him as their father. "All will be well with her," Eric thought, "and I shall not really have injured her. If she ever thinks of me, it may be as of one who did her a great service by saving her from the consequences of an unwise and undeserved preference." And he whispered again. "Good-bye, Ruth. Be very happy."

It was past three. He got up from the seat and strolled away. On a bench not far off a shabby and forlorn-looking man and woman were eating some food. They sat close together, with their bread and cheese and apples spread on a paper that lay on the woman's lap.

As Eric passed, the man looked up and, speaking as loudly as he could with his mouth full, called to him by

name. "Mr. Bowen! Well—what a surprise!" They were Mr. Rice, the sometime advertisement manager of the *Mayfair Gazette,* and Mrs. Andrews, its late charwoman, characteristically having a snack together. Mrs. Andrews hastily wrapped up what remained of the food, while Eric sat down on their bench and talked to them. They both seemed delighted to see him, and Rice said it was a pleasure to find that he was not too proud to notice them.

It occurred to Eric that this was the very first time that he had seen the nondescript Mrs. Andrews in broad daylight. She appeared to have more individuality than one would have guessed when one knew her only as a silent form that moved to and fro in the greyness and obscurity of that dusty ground floor at the *Gazette* offices. It also struck him that he had never before heard her voice. She said very little now, but each time that she joined in the conversation her simple comment was very much to the point.

Rice, with his drooping moustache and watery blue eyes, was much the same as he had always been, except for the external shabbiness which spoke of adversity. He told Eric immediately that in the last year he had been "fairly put through it."

"There's worse things than going hungry to bed," said Mrs. Andrews, tucking away the small parcel of nourishment.

Rice, it seemed, had been soon dismissed by the new editor of the *Gazette,* and perhaps not unnaturally his faithful assistant had followed him. Their reputation had been darkened by Cyril's disgrace, and Cyril, as Mr. Rice

said, had not lifted a finger to save them. "You know, of course, how the potentate came to bowl him out and expose him at the end?"

Eric in fact had not known, and he did not wish to know now.

Rice, continuing, said he had thought of writing to Eric for a testimonial, but had not ventured to take the liberty. He had felt that he must stand on his own legs.

"In my view, sir, they've done wonders with the *Gazette* since they got rid of Faulkner. Mr. Cornish has put his energy behind it, as well as the finance, and now of course the money he furnishes is spent as he intended. The talk has been this spring that the paper is paying its expenses. But I don't hardly believe that. It may do before Mr. Cornish has finished with it."

"Mr. Cornish is a clever gentleman," said Mrs. Andrews.

"As to that Faulkner—well, I never concealed my opinion of him, did I? He was the same to one and all. Miss Williams, she had some tales to tell about him. Of course he swindled Mr. C. up hill and down dale, till he was found out."

"Mr. Faulkner is a bad man," said Mrs. Andrews.

Then Rice recounted at considerable length his own misadventures and hardships. Try how he would, he could not get into regular employment. Things were so difficult that he had sometimes opined that he was unfitted for the rough and tumble of commercial life. He was too honest, too straightforward, too modest, to blow his own trumpet as many did. He could not push himself.

"He hasn't the temp'rament," said Mrs. Andrews.

Now, as is not unusual with people in his circumstances, he was looking out for a capitalist. As he said this his face brightened, his manner became more lively. "Up or down, I keep my eyes open, and believe me, Mr. Bowen, I've tumbled on a real good thing. There's a fortune going begging for anyone who can lay his hands on four or five thousand pounds. True as I sit here, sir, it's a certainty—safer than the Bank of England." And he looked at Eric with a sudden gleam of excitement in his eyes. "I s'pose I can't tempt you to take it up. You've prob'ly got all your funds engaged already, and no five thousands lying idle."

Then, with a growing exaltation of language, Mr. Rice described the "good thing," while Eric, feeling at first nothing but weariness, began to ask himself if, queer as it all sounded, this might not be the opening for which he had looked so long.

A certain trade journal called *The Metal Worker* was to be sold "dirt cheap" and whoever bought it and had the sense to manage it properly could not fail to do well. These trade papers, as Rice declared and as Eric knew, went on for ever; their advertisements kept them alive and profitable; they were small gold mines in which the ore-bearing vein never cropped out. In the case of *The Metal Worker* the proprietor was an elderly widow of large means who wished to sell the concern now at once and be done with it, to save herself trouble. It was a bona fide affair. The books were open to inspection. One might put in one's own accountant to examine everything. Moreover, the premises of the journal were freehold, a whole

house, and itself worth half the ten thousand pounds that was asked for the entire property.

"But you said just now five thousand."

"You could get it for five thou," Rice cried. "The half would be let remain on mortgage. Oh, Mr. Bowen, if you can entertain the project, I do beg and pray you to go into it, even if you leave poor me outside. Honour bright, it's the chance of a lifetime."

"He isn't always right," said Mrs. Andrews. "But I think he is now."

"Look here," said Rice, with great eagerness. "Can you spare fifteen minutes? Come straight there and see for yourself."

They went then, the three of them, to a little street leading out of Fetter Lane, and Eric was solemnly introduced to the freehold home of *The Metal Worker*.

It was not impressive—a narrow dingy little house, standing between a tavern and stationer's shop, with its ground-floor window decorated by a row of copies of the journal, open at different pages—"*The Metal Worker*, recognized organ of the allied trades." Humble as it seemed, however, an expert eye could see attractions in it. Rice praised it as if they were looking at a palace.

They entered the premises, and Rice made himself quite at home there, boldly announcing to the manager that he had brought the capitalist of whom he had so often spoken.

"Mr. Archer—Mr. Bowen. . . . Mr. Archer, any objection to showing him over?"

"Oh, none whatever."

They stayed there an hour, and in this time Eric became quite convinced that he was face to face with a real opportunity. The thing was a paying concern. He had but one doubt. It seemed too good to be true.

When they came out into the street Mrs. Andrews bade them good-bye, and they at once paid a visit to *The Metal Worker's* solicitors. Here again Eric met with every evidence of solid straightforward dealing. He spent the rest of the working day in "trade" circles, making inquiries as to the paper's standing, its circulation, its general prospects. Next morning he saw the proprietress, and after leaving her he determined boldly to take the offered chance. All then was promptly settled.

With the decision made, his spirits rose and every day he felt them still rising. He said to himself, "It is the turn of the tide." Thinking of the business in which he was about to embark, he had comforting sensations of strength and confidence. A small trade journal no doubt afforded a trumpery occupation when compared with the management of paper mills, the making of cement, or the building of ship docks and river dams; but if fate had ordained that it was to be his, he would throw himself into it heart and soul.

His ambition revived a little, wide schemes suggested themselves. He would succeed. He would buy more of these old trade journals or start some new ones himself. He would be a newspaper proprietor on a modest scale to begin with, and perhaps on a big scale to end with.

But before the time came to complete the purchase many things happened. Indeed the stream of events swept fast and carried him far from the chosen port.

XXI

FERNANDE was coming back. She had sent him a telegram to say she would arrive by an evening train, and he went to Waterloo to meet her.

As he walked up and down the long empty platform he was fighting against a cruel or at least an unkind thought. Waiting for her, expecting her, he had prepared a little speech of welcome; and then the thought had come. If he felt truly glad to have her with him again, he would not thus consider what words he should use or how best he might show his gladness.

He had come to the station too early, the train was two or three minutes late, and during these final minutes he suffered under a cold revelation of inexorable facts. He recognized with fatal clearness that her absence had brought him not only a respite from emotion, but a relief of mind. While she was away and he stood alone, his restlessness had left him, material affairs had gone better, he had been able both to think and to act in a firmer manner; above all he had found strength to shake off the selfish regrets and futile repinings that month after month had possessed him. Now the thraldom of fixed ideas seemed to hold him once more; his spirits were sinking fast; weariness and fatigue approached; he began to feel that old dark depression during which it had seemed to him that effort was impossible and no achievement of any real value.

Certainly he was fond of her. She was dear to him, immeasurably dear, because of her devotion. But his love was dead. He hated himself for knowing it, although the knowledge would never make any difference to her. Always he would hide it from her, always he would do his duty to her—as he was about to do his duty now.

The porters were lining up; the enormous engine, the great lamp-lit coaches, glided by; people crowded about the opened doors, and he could not see her. Then she was at his elbow, her hand was in his.

"You angel to come and meet me. But I thought you would. Eric, it seems a year since I left you—'a year whose days are long.' "

Although there was a dining car in the train she had not dined. Carrying her suit-case, he took her to the station restaurant, ordered food for her, and reproached her for not taking more care of herself.

"I wasn't hungry," she said. "Besides, I didn't want to be extravagant. Heaven knows, I have cost you enough already. Eric, how can I ever thank you for all the money you have sent me—and for such a purpose!"

She looked white and thin and sad in her black dress. She ate very little, but they sat talking for a long while. When she first spoke of her dead husband she could scarcely restrain herself from crying. Then, as she went on, her face had the spiritualised aspect that often came to it when she forgot her immediate surroundings, and her voice was sweet and gentle.

"Eric, it shook me dreadfully. He asked me to forgive him. He thanked me—oh, he thanked me so pitifully for staying with him. I can't tell you what I felt to-day at

the funeral. Of course I was the only person there—not another soul who had known him in all his life. . . . Once more bless you and thank you, Eric"; and she made a gesture with her hands as if reverently dismissing a phantom to the realm of phantoms. "Now tell me about the wonderful enterprise—Eric's great adventure. I'm quite sure, I *know*, dear, that it is going to turn up trumps. It must be all right if you believe in it. You have been so splendidly wise and cautious"; and she smiled at him fondly.

He admired her for all that she had said; with every word his thoughts had softened to her tenderness; and he talked now cheerfully, as with his trusted comrade, his never failing ally, telling her of *The Metal Worker* and of his expended schemes and ambitions. She encouraged him and applauded him. She had not a doubt of his ultimate success.

She was sweet too with regard to Mr. Rice and Mrs. Andrews, rejoicing as he did that he would be able to give a lift in the world to these humble friends. She laughed gaily as she asked questions about the relationship between these two.

"Mr. Rice of course is the mouse that has gnawed the cords for my lion. He really has, Eric. So we must allow him to bring his lady-mouse, and make much of her also."

The bill had been settled and their waiter wanted them to go. He was fidgeting round the table. Fernande, observing these signs, proposed that Eric should take her to her lodgings and remain with her there for an hour or so. The landlady would not mind.

"It'll be quite all right," she whispered. "You know,

Mrs. Jones is really an old dear. She never asks any questions."

Eric was thinking of a thousand other meetings like this one to-night in the noisy railway station. Waiting for her, meeting her, eating food with her in public places; finding excuses, throwing dust in people's eyes, disavowing their aims; furtiveness, stealthiness, a few hours of comfort gained by humiliation, a few moments of passionate bliss paid for in shame—these things had made up the tale of their intercourse from the beginning till now. Any change in the conditions that governed them both must assuredly be a change for the better. It could not conceivably be for the worse.

And this same evening, at the lodgings, he asked her to marry him.

"Eric, say it again. I wanted you so much to say that. I *hoped* you would. Now let me hear it once more."

He repeated his words.

"Thank you, dear." Her face was shining, her eyes glowed mistily, and she drew her chair close to his and, stooping, kissed his hand. "But the answer is No, Eric—oh, such a whopping tremendous No. . . . I wanted you to prove your goodness, but you dear, dear boy, did you think for a moment that I would take advantage—that I would let you sacrifice yourself?"

"I am not sacrificing myself," he said firmly. "It is obviously what we must do. It goes without saying that we'll be married now that we can be."

"Never in this world, my dearest."

"Why not? I don't understand."

"Oh, yes, you do—perfectly well. Would you have

asked me to be your wife if you hadn't felt—if you hadn't felt—" Then the tears came and she could not go on. She slid from the chair and, kneeling by him, laid her face on his knees and wept. "What sort of a wife am I—for anybody, much less you? Why, darling, if I hated you instead of loving you, loving you with every little bit of me, what more horrid thing could I do than marry you? But, oh, Eric, you dear staunch friend, why is it that life is so damnably cruel in giving us the mockery of chances when all our chances are gone? Why couldn't I have met you earlier—before it was too late? Just think of it. Suppose I had been decently brought up, and you and I had met when I was young and good and with unshaken confidence in myself and in all the world. What a wife I would have been to you then! Before God I swear that I wouldn't have dragged you down then. I would have lifted you, lifted, lifted you, my darling. No man could have had a better, truer woman than the woman I was meant to be. . . . But it's too late now"; and her tears fell faster and faster. "This battered old Fernande of yours won't pass muster as a wife any more. You can do what you like with her, except marry her. Sooner than let you do that, she would throw herself over Hungerford Bridge and make the proper conventional end to her story."

He told her then that she was tired and overwrought. After she had slept and rested she would see things differently. They had said enough now. They would talk about it again to-morrow.

"Eric," she said, "you frighten me when you speak like that—as if you meant to force me to agree."

"I shall not force you," he said. "But of course you will agree."

Next day, and the day after that, she refused again. But he was as firm as a rock, or as the concrete he had once helped to manufacture. It seemed to him that, perhaps more clearly than he had known anything throughout his life, he knew now in what manner he ought to act, and how mean and poor-spirited he would be if he shrank from acting.

She said, tremulously, "You are tempting me. I am not as strong as you. Don't break me down and make me do what I am sure is wrong."

Although she still opposed him, saying it was not to be thought of, she showed involuntarily that only her unselfishness prevented her from confessing she ardently desired it, and that she was persistently thinking of it. Once more he admired the noble side of her character; once more he felt melting compassion, yearning tenderness. If he had needed a stimulus to render his determination stronger, it would have been provided by the difficulty he met with before she yielded.

He told her that she should have what she had never had, a true home; something more than a mere shelter, a place that had an atmosphere of permanence and security. He sketched the life that they were to lead together, saying that they need not live in London itself, but could find a delightful little house on the further outskirts among fields, green lanes, beech woods, and come to their work every morning and go back at night.

Her eyes were bright as he talked of it all, and while he spoke so hopefully he felt real hope.

He thought that when she was his wife he might regain something of the old companionship. Gradually the spiritual bond could be renewed. They would be again nearly, if not quite, that which they had once been to each other.

She consented.

"You are too good," she said, "and I am too weak. Now this is all I ask. Don't let us be in a hurry. Take time."

"No, I don't want any delay."

Before the day was over they had been to the registrar of their district and had applied for a certificate authorising marriage. For a shilling they had pledged themselves; for another shilling three weeks hence they would be granted a certificate to enable Eric Bowen and Fernande, widow of Richard Evans Sandford, to be united as man and wife.

As they came away from the registrar's office she was silent and thoughtful, creasing her white forehead with frowns. Then when she spoke she had one of her mischievous smiles.

"Eric, I didn't give my right age. There's a loophole for you. I believe that any false description invalidates it. I meant to tell the truth, but at the last I couldn't."

After this she was serious; and next day he became aware of a subtle but unmistakable change in her. A sort of quiet dignity had settled upon her. In the beginning of things he had thought her very dignified, but his impression now was made by something altogether different. There had been defiance, scorn, perhaps a little self-assertion too, in that manner and bearing which he had so

greatly admired. Now there was no pride of any kind. She was soft, gentle, and yet inwardly exalted. Observing her, he felt his hope grow higher.

Already it seemed impossible that she was the same woman who such a little while ago had fretfully wrangled with him.

She spoke to him, touchingly, of her own feelings.

"Eric dear, if I were a Roman Catholic I would like to go into a retreat to prepare myself. But as I can't do that, will you understand if I ask you not to be with me much? If I am to have you always, this little time doesn't count. You see, there are so many things that I would like to forget. I would like to make myself feel as if I was an engaged girl. Do you understand?"

He understood.

"Thank you, Eric. So go on with your work. You are very busy. Leave Fernande to herself."

In fact he was busy, settling all final arrangements for taking over the newspaper. The purchase was about to be completed. He had sold his securities and the purchase-money lay ready at the bank. He was only waiting now to write the cheque and sign the deeds.

XXII

A MAN was talking to him on the telephone, a solicitor of Bedford Row. Eric had thought at first that he must be somebody connected with *The Metal Worker;* but this Mr. Joshua Farraday said no, he wanted to see Mr. Bowen about another matter, a matter of the most urgent importance. He wanted to see him at once.

Eric went to Bedford Row. It was late in the afternoon.

"Much obliged by your promptness," said Mr. Farraday. "Very much obliged. I got on your track by accident—didn't know you were in advertising"; and as if introducing himself, he added that in the past he had done a little business with Mr. Cornish and had heard of Eric without having the pleasure of meeting him. "Sit down, won't you?" and he spoke to a clerk. "Denham, remain with us and have all those papers ready as I ask for them —the copies, you know, not the originals."

In spite of the improbable surname, Mr. Farraday was unquestionably a Jew. Middle-aged, stout, glib of tongue, he addressed Eric with the greatest politeness, and yet lurking beneath the outward courtesy there seemed to be something familiar, even insolent. At any rate there was something unpleasing in his manner, and the interview had not progressed far before Eric was aware of a strangeness, an unusualness, in Mr. Farraday's whole method of conducting it.

"May I ask what the business is?"

"Yes," said Farraday. "I always believe in going straight to the fountain-head. That is why I am troubling you. For I feel sure you will be willing and anxious to help us if it is in your power. . . . Sit down, Mr. Johnson."

A big common-looking man had come into the room, and he seated himself at a little distance from the solicitor.

"I was saying," continued Mr. Farraday, "that we rely on Mr. Bowen's willing aid, and I am sure he won't mind answering a few questions to begin with. But he has just asked me a question himself. He wishes to know what is the business. . . . Well, now, Mr. Bowen, it is this."

And he said that one of his clients had been induced to invest money in a foolish way. He feared indeed that the investment was of a worse than foolish character. The sum of money was considerable—say four thousand seven hundred pounds to be exact—and now it would be fortunate for everybody if the money could be recovered and the investment cancelled.

"Is your client this gentleman?" asked Eric, looking at the big man.

"No, our client is a lady. That of course makes the matter more delicate"; and Mr. Farraday said that not unnaturally the lady wished her name to be kept out of it. She hoped that from start to finish her name would not be mentioned. "Perhaps you can guess it."

"No," said Eric.

"She wants her money, Mr. Bowen. She does not hesi-

tate to suggest that it was obtained by fraudulent means; but shrinking from publicity, as she does, her attitude is that she will make no further inquiries, nothing more will be done by her—if she gets the money back."

"And how do you suggest I can help her to get it?"

"No means suggests itself to *you*, Mr. Bowen?"

"No. I simply don't know what and who you are talking about."

"Is that so?"

Then Mr. Farraday went on with his questions, and Eric observed that he and the big common man exchanged one or two quick glances.

"You are, I think, busy in various lines on Mr. Cornish's account?"

"No, I have had nothing to do with Mr. Cornish for a long time."

"Oh, I am aware that you have severed your close connection with Mr. Cornish—that you no longer live with him. But you still represent him in various interests?"

"No. None whatever."

"Really? You have, I think, many irons in the fire. You mentioned a newspaper for instance—when we were speaking on the 'phone—of which I had not heard at all. Is there not one affair of yours with which Mr. Cornish has been put forward as taking a prominent part? . . . Stay."

Eric was indignant and angry. He had had more than enough of this interrogation. He rose from his chair.

"Please," said Mr. Farraday, "do please allow yourself time for consideration before answering my last question —or refusing to answer it."

"No time is needed. I have already answered you"; and Eric picked up his hat. Although angry, he spoke with adequate self-control. "I cannot concern myself any further with your unknown client and her shady transactions." As he said this he was further nettled by seeing Mr. Farraday and the big silent man look at each other again. "Your summoning me here is merely an impertinence, and you are probably often impertinent without knowing it. But after what you have said of fraud, your assumption that I should be in any way cognizant of the matter is obviously an intentional insult"; and he moved towards the door.

"No, don't go. Don't hurry off like that." Mr. Farraday was suave, ingratiating, and yet strangely firm of tone after his rebuke. "I quite see your point. But if I say at once that this is more or less an appeal in the ends of justice— Otherwise we should not have presumed, perhaps . . . Yes, we should have though—for another reason. Now let me say this. Mr. Cornish is at least interested in the inquiries we are making. Whether he knows it or not, he must be interested unless things are cleared up satisfactorily."

"Has Mr. Cornish instructed you to consult me?"

"No. We have had no communication with him so far." And again Mr. Farraday glanced at the big man. "I beg you not to be impatient." Then after a moment's pause he said, "Mr. Bowen, I shall put my cards on the table. Will you oblige by frankly tell us what you know of the Bolivian Mining Concessions Syndicate?"

"Nothing. Bolivian Mining Syndicate! I never heard of it."

"No? Concessions granted by the government of Bolivia for silver mining, gold mining, every sort of mining. English syndicate with an address in the Euston Road. Does that address suggest nothing to you?"

"No."

"Am I to understand you to say you have never authorised the use of your name in connection with it?"

"No. Certainly not."

"Denham, give me that letter of February eleventh."

The clerk produced a typewritten folio sheet, and Mr. Farraday handed it to Eric. It purported to be a copy of a letter written from an office in the Euston Road, under the heading of the Mining Syndicate. But the names of the person to whom it was addressed and of the person who had signed it were omitted. With amazement Eric saw his own name mentioned two or three times in the letter. *"Mr. Bowen asks me to say that he did not join our Syndicate until he had himself made the fullest investigations. . . . Both Mr. Bowen and his friends have shown their confidence by the largeness of the stake they have taken. . . . Mr. Bowen has no hesitation in reassuring you as to the stability of the present régime and government in Bolivia. . . ."*

"This is a mistake," said Eric. "It must be another Bowen."

"I'm afraid it is worse than a mistake," said Mr. Farraday, "and it is undoubtedly meaning you yourself."

Eric had experienced the shock which people always have when they are informed that they have been in some place they have never visited, or that they have failed to reply to some important communication they have never

received, or that they have made some speech they know they could not in any circumstances have uttered. They feel that more than error is being committed, an insidious and dangerous attack is being made upon them.

"Read this one too." And another typewritten copy was handed to him.

This second letter purported to have been dictated by Mr. Eric Bowen before leaving England for the Continent, and in it he was made to speak of the report of a mining engineer at Rio de Janeiro. Again no name except his own was shown.

"Can I see the original letters?" he asked.

"No, I think not. I think it is wiser and safer not to at this stage."

"I don't agree with you. I think I have a right to see them. And they certainly cannot be withheld for long."

"You disown all knowledge of the letters?"

"Absolutely."

"Your position, Mr. Bowen, is that someone has been impersonating you or falsely representing you."

"Without doubt."

"Then what do you propose to do about it?"

"First of all I shall consult my solicitors."

"Who are your solicitors?" asked Mr. Farraday sharply.

Eric named the firm that was acting for him in the purchase of *The Metal Worker*.

"Bevan and Preece." Mr. Farraday echoed the names. "Good people. An excellent firm."

"You will hear from them in due course," said Eric.

"Very soon, I hope," said Mr. Farraday. "We on our

side shall be compelled to put the matter in the hands of the police." And there was a distinct exchange of signs between him and the big man. "Yes, we shall have no choice but to do that, unless we obtain satisfaction." He said this firmly, almost aggressively, and then began to talk in the usual guarded professional style, saying that if fraud had been committed, far be it from him to suggest any compromise, or indeed any procedure that might seem like an avoidance of the consequence of an illegal act. "But, as I have said, we want our money. Four thousand, seven hundred pounds. After all it is not a large sum. I am making no extended promises. I cannot answer for others, but this I can say plainly—my client will do no more if she recovers her money immediately—say within the next twenty-four hours. If not, the police—and she faces the inevitable publicity."

"There's no reason why you should wait twenty-four hours on my account," said Eric.

"Nevertheless we shall wait," said Mr. Farraday, "till to-morrow evening. In that time something fresh may turn up. I do not abandon hope that you may after all be able to aid us. You may find that you have influence—that you can pull certain strings. I cannot say any more. Good-night, Mr. Bowen."

It was too late to get advice this evening from Messrs. Bevan and Preece. Instinctively, however, Eric crossed Holborn and went to their offices in Lincoln's Inn. By some chance perhaps the offices might be open. But they were not. Closed doors met him.

He was disturbed; his composure had been badly shaken. He thought that the large common man was al-

most certainly a private detective, an ex-member of the police force now working for the sort of people who call themselves inquiry agents. Neither he nor the impudent Jew had believed in his innocence. On the contrary, they were convinced that he was deeply involved in the bogus mining syndicate, if not its head and front. They thought him a common swindler, and their hope had been to make him disgorge some of the money that he had fraudulently obtained.

But together with anger against this Farraday he felt a kind of superstitious dread. Like all young healthy people he hated mystery. And the thing seemed so completely mysterious.

Going into an hotel in Fleet Street he wrote a letter to Bevan and Preece, telling them all that had happened, and asking them to take steps at once to clear his character by exposing the audacious people who had used his name. He begged them to adopt a very strong attitude towards Mr. Farraday. He further said that he was utterly at a loss as to any explanation of the facts, and unable to make the remotest guess as to the originators of the fraud. Finally he pointed out that in Farraday's hints or half disclosures there was an inference that Mr. Cornish's name had been used as freely as his own.

He felt a little easier after going back to Lincoln's Inn and putting his letter in Bevan and Preece's letter-box. He could do nothing more now. But as he walked homeward to his hotel he felt the torment of restless suspicions that seek for solid ground to sustain them and find mere emptiness and darkness whithersoever they fly. He thought of the innumerable business people that he had

met while in Cornish's employment. They were all, as he remembered them, substantial, respectable, even eminent, in the business world—contractors, engineers, stock-brokers, bankers. No mining speculators. No shady company promoters. But these men of repute would have hangers-on to their houses, doubtful correspondents, relatives of the black sheep variety—dismissed clerks too, or occasional dependants—whose dishonesty was hidden from them. One of these undetected rascals might have known him, made note of his circumstances, and quietly planned mischief to be set going if a chance occurred. It was as if, being without a valid reason for suspecting anybody, he had no choice but to suspect everybody.

At the hotel he heard that Fernande had been there two or three times asking for him. On her last visit, about an hour ago, she had left a note. He read it with wonder, and again felt the discomfort of an enveloping mystery.

"Meet me by the tram station at the bottom of Highgate Hill. I shall wait for you there. Come as soon as you can. But don't speak to me or notice me until I speak to you. F."

He went off to meet her. It was now nearly nine o'clock, with the street lamps gleaming palely in the summer twilight, and the colour and distinctness beginning to go from the house fronts, the people on the pavements, and the passing vehicles in the roadway. He hurried down the long hill and mingled with the crowd about the omnibuses and the trams, at the bottom of it. In the strong light here, faces as they turned seemed on fire for

an instant, then grew dark and vanished. Presently he saw Fernande standing on the opposite side of the broad road. She looked about her, hesitated, and then came swiftly across to him.

She said a word or two and led him away with her into a side street. She seemed agitated, scared, unlike herself.

"Fernande," he said, "what's the matter? You are frightened."

"Yes, I'm frightened," she said walking fast, with her head lowered, and not looking at him. "I am frightened. I want you to come to my rooms."

"But this is not the way there."

"I know; but I'm afraid that perhaps we are being followed. If so—if you are seen—you mustn't come there. Now let me go on a little way. And watch if anybody is following."

She made him do this at the corners of several streets, and twice they turned and walked back retracing their steps. Then, when he assured her that nobody was observing them, she turned again and took him straight to her lodgings.

"As fast as we can now, Eric dear. I'll tell you. I have hatefully bad news for you. Cyril is there."

"Cyril! I thought he was in South America."

"No, he's here. He came to me this afternoon—in his trouble. Eric, he has done something dreadful. The police are after him. He is hiding from the police. . . . Now look round. Let me go on. I'll leave the door open. Wait to see if it's safe. Then slip in quickly."

Cyril! Eric's heart had turned cold at the sound of that name. The sinister figure lurking in the background,

the personification of sordidness and degradation, forgotten of late, but always there, inevitable, not to be escaped from in the lives of Fernande and himself, had come forward again into the light, confronting them, blocking their path. The mystery was going fast, but Eric's dread grew solid and of oppressive weight. As he went up the dark stairs of Fernande's room he knew what he was going to hear.

Cyril! He had racked his brain thinking of a hundred people who might be guilty of the fraud and had never for a moment thought of Cyril.

Cyril was by the fireless hearth; haggard, shabby, dreadful to see, seeming to have in his eyes that look of the hunted animal which one always attributes to every human being when in peril and flying from the consequences of his misdeeds; and yet nevertheless he miserably attempted to maintain some feeble mask of decency, not to show his evident terror, still to swagger rather than to cringe.

"Eric, old boy, this is a damned awkward business."

"And a damned dirty one, Cyril."

Eric felt at the same time wrath, pity, and disgust. But he had spoken with fierce anger, and once more he spoke in the same tone.

"Anyhow, don't lie about it. Let's have the whole truth, however beastly."

Preposterously, yet somehow impressively, Cyril rallied himself and made one of his old superb gestures.

"Eric, be chivalrous. Don't disappoint me. Don't hit a man when he is down."

They told him then, the two of them—Cyril in a halt-

ing cynical way, and Fernande at his elbow prompting him, making excuses for him, helping him out with it.

"Remember," she said, "the real blame is with those awful men he associated himself with. It is they who have bolted and let him down."

The victim, the reticent lady who wished to be refunded without publicity, was Mrs. Adolph Lynch.

Cyril had fully believed in the genuineness of the Bolivian enterprise, and even now he would not admit that there was no foundation for such a belief. His two associates had appeared to him honest as daylight. But, alas, they had made a tool, a cat's-paw, of him. They had persuaded him to let them use Mrs. Lynch's money at Monte Carlo with their precious system. Every penny of it was lost; and they had absconded, leaving Cyril "to face the music." And the bother was, as Cyril confessed, he had put himself in the wrong when persuading Mrs. Lynch to part with her money by a resort to what would from the legal point of view too probably be classed as false pretences.

"You mean," said Eric, "by telling her that I was in it, by forging letters, and so on."

Cyril made another gesture, but a feeble one.

"We mustn't be too hard on him," said Fernande, gently. "Remember he has been led into trouble by others"; and, leaving Cyril, she came and stood by Eric. "But it is still possible to save him. Eric dear, *you* can save him if you will."

"How? Let Cyril speak for himself, please."

Cyril, speaking for himself huskily and brokenly, said

that the obvious course to pursue was for Eric kindly to assume a certain amount of responsibility—to say, in fact, that he had authorised the use of his name.

Eric told them that this suggestion came too late. He had already denied all knowledge of the affair. And he briefly narrated his interview with Farraday.

"Then it's all up." Cyril, saying this, sank upon a chair. He sat huddled, with hanging hands, a pitiable presentment of terror and despair. "My God. It's all over, Fernande," he groaned. "Eric has given me the last stroke. He has done me in."

But Fernande, going back to him, patting his shoulder, pulling up one of his limp hands, said that it was not too late, it was not all over. She looked tragic, wild, as she turned from one to the other with eager entreaties for both.

"Cyril, don't lose heart. Don't funk. . . . Eric, you *must* help him. Think, Eric. We can't abandon him. . . . Cyril, we mean to pull you through it. . . . Eric darling," and she clung to him, almost shook him, "you must save him somehow. Go to that cursed woman. Go to Mrs. Lynch and get her to stop the proceedings. Make promises—appeal to her feelings. She was fond of him. She was absolutely devoted to him. She can't—she can't be so wicked and vindictive as—"

"It's no use," groaned Cyril. "I'm done for"; and Fernande became as one distraught.

"Shut up. Leave it to us. Eric, don't listen to him. Go now to Mrs. Lynch. Tell her she shall be paid bit by bit. Then we must get Cyril away—out of the country—

beyond her reach. There's not a minute to lose." She was pushing Eric towards the door. "Think. If you don't save him it's penal servitude. They'll give him seven years. He says so. He couldn't do it. He hasn't the strength. He would never come out again. He'd die in prison. Oh, save him."

Eric went to the house in Lancaster Gate. It was now past ten o'clock.

Mrs. Lynch was at home; Mrs. Lynch had not yet gone to bed; but she declined to see him. With difficulty he obtained permission to enter the hall and write a note to her. In reply to his urgent request for an interview she in her turn wrote him a note, presenting compliments, repeating her refusal, and referring him to Mr. Farraday of Bedford Row, who had duly reported that he was in touch with Mr. Bowen.

He went then to a public telephone office and rang up Mrs. Lynch. As had happened once before, the first of the few occasions on which he had heard that thick Jewish voice, Mrs. Lynch herself answered the call. As soon as he told her who was speaking she cut him off. He waited a few minutes and rang her up again. This time the voice was loud but shaky; his persistence had upset her; but the utmost he could affect by his pleading was a permission to ring up a third time in twenty minutes. She said that, late as it was, she would endeavour to get into communication with Mr. Farraday. If Mr. Farraday allowed her, she would see Mr. Bowen, although nothing could be gained by her doing so.

Mr. Farraday approved of the interview. When Eric next rang up he was told to return to the house.

Mrs. Lynch saw him, but, as she had predicted, nothing was gained. The interview was painful, odious, and disgusting. It made him feel sick as well as hopeless. He sat with her in her ornate morning-room, a room as vulgarly splendid as those at the riverside cottage, and she bemoaned herself for ever having fallen into the clutches of such a blackguard as Faulkner. She recited the sums of money she had spent upon him. No one in this world, she vowed, had ever shown such lavish generosity or been so abominably treated. She wrung her hands, she shed tears; but she was obdurate in her determination to recover that money or let justice take its course.

"I exonerate you," she said, "but it makes him only the worse. Oh, the lies—the lies—he told me. Oh, he was false to me—false all through. He has been a wretch to me."

Fat, grey-haired, in some slight disarray of costume as she swung herself about on a yellow satin couch, she spoke now of other wrongs than the loss of her money. But as to the money, when she returned to that branch of the nauseating subject, she was still implacable, flabbily implacable, nevertheless implacable.

"Mr. Farraday has told you what he—that wretch—has to do. He will pay me to-morrow or he shall go to gaol."

It would have been futile to continue the argument.

Eric made his way back to Fernande's lodgings. It was past midnight, another day had begun, but there could be

no hurry now. He walked slowly, thinking more of the past and of the future than of the present time.

Fernande had given him her latch-key, but before taking it out of his pocket he walked past the house to the end of the street, stood at a corner, and then returned. The few people in this and other neighbouring streets were walking briskly. No one was hanging about or watching. He let himself into the house and went up to her room.

Notwithstanding her fear of being shadowed by the police, she had been out to buy some brandy for Cyril in order to steady his nerves; and Cyril, drinking it freely, had tainted the air with an odour of alcohol. They had heard the footstep on the stair, and as Eric came into the room they were on their feet, side by side, near the fireplace. It was as though their distress had drawn them together mentally as well as physically. They resembled each other. Both of them now looked like fugitives and outlaws. They were two conspirators who in crimes against society and dread of its impending punishments had become kindred spirits.

Eric saw their white faces and staring eyes; and as it seemed to him they and the room made a picture of such unsurpassable degradation that neither he nor they could sink to a lower depth than had now been reached.

But Cyril, with a fresh collapse of terror, some more moanings and shiverings, was still able to take them just a little lower.

This came with the answer to the question as to whether Mrs. Lynch had relented; and throughout his display of craven anguish Fernande stood over him, patting and

caressing him, imploring him to be courageous, to pull himself together.

"Eric won't desert you. He'll think of something else. We'll stick to you, Cyril."

"Leave him alone and come here," said Eric firmly. "I want to speak to him."

She obeyed, going to Eric.

"Yes, speak to him. Say you'll try to help him. You mean to help him."

"How can he help me," groaned Cyril, "unless he finds the money? And he won't do that. I'm done for."

"But I *will* find the money," said Eric in the same tone. "I have found it already—my own money;" and he told Cyril that before noon Mrs. Lynch should be paid every farthing of her claim.

Cyril ceased to moan, but went on trembling. He stammered with broken husky phrases, and one heard such words as salvation, gratitude, and so on.

Then Fernande had a revolt of feeling. She cried out to Cyril that they could not accept what was offered.

"Cyril, you mustn't let him . . . No, Eric, you can't —you shan't do it. It's noble—it's splendid of you,—but you shan't ruin yourself. I tell you, I won't allow it"; and she would have gone back to Cyril if Eric had let her go. "It's the money with which he is going to establish himself—it's the sacrifice of his whole life that he is offering. Cyril, you mustn't take it."

"Be quiet," said Eric, with his arm round her waist, holding her to him. "Look here," and he spoke to Cyril again. "Don't be afraid. I have made up my mind to do it, and I shan't change my mind. . . . It's true, what she

says—that I counted on using this money in a very different way. It's all that I have, and I was putting my hopes on its use. . . . You helped me once. Now I'm helping you. I wronged you. Now you have wronged me. You shall have the money, Cyril. But henceforth I shall think that you and I are quits."

XXIII

BEFORE the end of the day Cyril was safe. Fate, as represented in the unattractive body of Mrs. Adolph Lynch, had ceased to pursue him. Feeling such professional distaste as may be readily imagined, the respectable firm of Bevan and Preece carried through the dubious transaction; Mr. Farraday, smiling and self-complacent, congratulated himself on having done a master stroke for his client; and Eric Bowen, with a credit balance at his bankers of a few odd pounds instead of five thousand, for the second time had thrown away the prospect of a successful future.

Cyril was safe and yet not safe. For there remained the danger of fresh accusations. Implicated in all that had been done by his absconding accomplices, he might be pounced upon and invited to answer for any one of their iniquities. Bevan and Preece urged that Mr. Faulkner should be at once removed to a considerable distance from his native land.

"If you hear he has been arrested," said Mr. Bevan, "you may know it will need a stronger protector than you to get him off. In fact, the odds will then be a hundred to one that your sacrifice has been just wasted."

Thus Eric's nightmare was not even yet over. It continued day after day for four days, during each of which he waited and hoped for a message from Fernande to say that Cyril had gone.

He had not seen her again, for in helping to hide Cyril she had decided that it would be best to hide herself. She had left her lodgings, and would not return to them until the peril had passed. She had taken charge of Cyril; it was she who would make all arrangements for his departure, look after him, and guard him until they had said good-bye to each other for ever.

Every day she communicated with Eric; but her brief notes did not bring him either a sense of finality or of comfort. Indeed these letters of hers still further chilled him, made him heavier of spirit, took from him any possibility of feeling contentment in his immense misfortune. She did not give him a word of tenderness or gratitude, much less a cheering promise of such fidelity and love as would requite him. She had made her one strong protest against acceptance of his generosity, and that was all. She seemed to treat it now as something so natural that it was not worth speaking about any more. Her tone wounded him terribly, for he as much as Cyril needed kindness and support.

Without comfort, without hope, dully and heavily, he resumed his work at the office of the advertisement people, the work that he had never cared for, the work that he had wanted to escape from, that he was doomed to cling to now for as long as his employers would allow.

And in these days of anxious waiting and enforced renunciation there was the further burden of regret in regard to Mr. Rice and Mrs. Andrews.

He had written at once to the unhappy Rice, to tell him that the negotiation for the purchase of *The Metal*

Worker was broken off, the deposit forfeited, the whole scheme destroyed; but he was of course obliged to see Rice and endeavour by soft expressions to mitigate the severity of the blow he had inflicted.

Poor disappointed Rice said at first that he could not, would not, believe it. Surely it was a postponement, not a total failure. On his own responsibility he had begged the newspaper people to give Mr. Bowen time, and they had promised to keep the matter open for at least a week or so. Surely Mr. Bowen could raise the money to complete the purchase if a little time were at his disposal. Then when Eric said that time would not aid him, Rice uttered a most tragical lament.

Eric drank the bitter cup to its dregs in his last talk with Rice and the forlorn but silent Mrs. Andrews.

They had pinned their faith on him and he had failed them.

On the fifth morning he received no letter from Fernande. But amongst his other letters there was one from his bank. Thinking that it could not be of any importance he opened it last, after reading all the rest.

It was a formal announcement that his account had been credited with the sum of four thousand seven hundred pounds received yesterday.

Mysteriously, amazingly, incredibly, the money had come back to him. The exact amount that he had taken out four days ago had been reinstated. He was again a capitalist; he could buy the newspaper; his future belonged to him.

But how? Hope and wonder filled his mind until incredulity grew stronger than any other thought. Yet why should he doubt? The bank said so. The thing must be true, however strange.

Mrs. Lynch? Could it be that she had relented after all, or that somehow learning it was he and not Cyril who had settled her claim, she had magnanimously decided to let Cyril off rather than punish his innocent friend? Had Cyril himself, recovering courage or stimulated by Fernande to make a desperate effort, gone boldly to Mrs. Lynch, confessed everything, and obtained her forgiveness? She might have better qualities than one guessed. Cyril knew the key to her heart.

Then suddenly Eric's hopes fell. A possible explanation had suggested itself. The best of banks make mistakes; rarely, and therefore irritatingly, even maddeningly, because they have taught one to rely with such confidence on their unfailing accuracy. This was not a credit, but a debit! In some idiotic way the entry of that sum he had paid out was being repeated, and by a clerk's error it had been put down on the other side of the ledger?

He was pacing to and fro on the pavement outside the bank premises before they opened their doors, and as soon as the iron shutters lifted he hurried in. The manager had not arrived, but the assistant manager could tell him all that there was to tell.

There had been no mistake. The amount was correct. It had come to them from another bank in a banker's draft. They did not know on whose behalf the money had been paid. They had no means of ascertaining.

He went then to Messrs. Bevan and Preece.

They were entirely ignorant of the matter. They congratulated him, but could give him no clue. At his request they reluctantly consented to speak by telephone to Mr. Farraday, discreetly sounding him as to anything in the nature of a communication that might have passed between his client and theirs in the last few days. Quite evidently Farraday knew nothing about it. After this, and more reluctantly, they consented to ring up Mrs. Lynch. There was delay and difficulty here. But at last they reached Mrs. Lynch's ear. Mrs. Lynch told them that she had made no move in the direction of Mr. Bowen; giving them to understand that, although she had no personal quarrel with Mr. Bowen, she never wished to hear or think of him again.

Who had done it? Once during the course of the day he persuaded himself that the agent of deliverance was Rice—Rice, the mouse, as Fernande had said, gnawing the cords again. Rice had found a capitalist. Rice, determined that the newspaper purchase should not be abandoned, had prevailed upon somebody to provide what Eric had undertaken to supply. He soon, however, saw that this notion was absurd. If a capitalist was putting up the money, he could hardly be expected to pay it into another person's banking account. Besides, it would not be that particular sum. Only somebody who knew of the Lynch transaction could know the precise amount that Eric required.

Late that evening the justice of this thought was confirmed. It had been done by somebody with full knowledge of the facts. Fernande said so.

"Our danger is over." He was reading a letter from her. *"Everything is arranged. Everything is all right. A good friend has come forward and has extricated us. As I dare say you have heard, your noble, chivalrous aid is not to be allowed to ruin you. Things have worked out all right for you too. Cyril has repaid your loan."*

He read these cold statements and stopped. She told him too little. Who was the friend?

"Cyril sails to-morrow morning from Southampton for Buenos Aires by the Royal Mail Line. Out there he will not have to slink or hide, or grow a beard or change his name. There is work for him to do. Our friend is giving him another chance, a last chance. If he can run straight, all will be well with him. I think, I pray, that he will try. He has had many lessons, and this has been a sharp lesson to end the series."

Then came the first words of tenderness; and as Eric read on, he thought no more of this mysterious friend of hers, nor of the money, nor of himself. He thought only of Fernande. Nothing else counted now. And she was not writing to him, she was speaking to him. He could hear the deep note of her voice, its thrilling sweetness, its tragic wildness, its infinitely pathetic appeal, that used to draw his heart from his body, that made him yield and long and melt in pity, in affection, in bitter, bitter regret. It was as in that time when she talked to him at night, her voice far away, reaching him by a mechanical device; when, holding a common instrument in his hand, he used

to feel that her lips were close to his face, that she was stooping over his bed, and that if he stretched his arm in the darkness he could hold her pliant body.

"Now, my dearest one, I wonder will this letter hurt you or will it give you an enormous peace of mind. No, I am sure you will be sorry. But I am sure of this too, it cannot cause you a thousandth part of the pain in reading it that it has cost me to write it.

"I am going with Cyril. After all, he is my man, and he has never needed me so much as now. I should perhaps be rather a cad to deny him the help that he thinks he will get from me, and perhaps I should never be quite happy myself if afterwards I thought that being alone had spoilt his chance. So it seems my duty to go.

"But that isn't my real reason. It is for your sake really, my beloved, not for his. You have been so good, so true. And if without injuring you I could have been your wife, I should have felt that you had pulled me for ever out of the nether regions and taken me with you to heaven. But I knew all along that I ought not to marry you. Somebody HAD *to be sacrificed; and it must be me, not you.*

"I am with Cyril now; living with him, you understand, in one room. I have done this to make things irrevocable. I knew you wouldn't want to take me back after that. You couldn't, could you?

"Will you believe I love you and at last have proved my love? Oh, my life, my love, my Eric, please think for a little while that Fernande was ready to tear the heart out of her bosom, to cut her whole body into little bits

sooner than harm you; and then don't think about her any more, just forget her."

She had put no address on the letter-paper, but the envelope had the postmark of Southampton. They were there already.

Eric ran into the hall of the hotel, calling for an A.B.C. guide, asking for a taxi-cab, begging people to be quick. His one thought was to get to her, to rescue her from Cyril, to bring her away into a place of safety until the ship had sailed. Cyril should not take her—Cyril, with his blood-shot eyes and shaky hands. As Eric thought of him, he could see him, grey and unkempt, gulping at a glass of brandy, and then, for a moment brave, shrugging his shoulders and stretching his lean back.

The last train for Southampton had gone. If Eric had caught it, he would not have arrived there till midnight. If he got a motor-car, he would not arrive till the night was nearly over. All the inns and hotels would be closed. There would be no likelihood of finding them before they went on the ship to-morrow morning.

He went back into one of the public rooms, sat down, read her letter again and yet again.

His throat was dry, his eyes smarted; a discouragement as numbing as death slowly took possession of him. He had folded the letter now, but he was thinking of what she said he would understand—about Cyril and their room.

Once more she had done her work well. More surely than when she separated him from Daphne, she had now

cut the bonds between herself and him. She had known. He unfolded her letter and still another time read the words . . . *"To make things irrevocable. I knew you wouldn't want to take me back after that. You couldn't, could you?"*

XXIV

He was on the boat, seeking them, looking for them everywhere, and seeing them nowhere. The second boat-train had just discharged its load of passengers and increased the invasion of friends and relatives in attendance. There was excitement, a feverish haste as well as sadness, in the small moving groups. The office of the purser was so closely besieged with inquirers for letters and telegrams that one could not approach it. Round the table of the chief steward there was another dense crowd, composed of those who already were anxious about the places that had been allotted to them in the dining-saloon for the voyage. A lesser throng had discovered and were studying the large alphabetical list of first-class passengers.

The name of Faulkner was not shown on the first-class list.

Eric hurried away to hunt for them among the second-class passengers, but in the less ample space here the crowd was even greater. It was difficult to move. Eric went through the dining-room, the smoking-room, an open deck lounge; then, after struggling along a corridor, emerged on deck again, and came face to face with Mr. Cornish.

"Hullo, Bowen," said Cornish. "Where the devil are those people? I told Faulkner to be on the look-out."

He spoke loudly and irritably, but did not appear to be

in the least surprised at meeting Eric. Nor did he notice Eric's surprise. Very red, in his eternal blue pilot jacket, with his hat on the back of his head and showing his white hair ruffled at the temples, he looked like a superannuated sea-captain who had been fetched out in an emergency and was now about to go into his cabin, put on uniform, and take command of the ship. And exactly as if he had been in command, he called to a passing ship's officer and ordered rather than requested him to produce Mr. and Mrs. Faulkner.

Cornish! The friend who had come to the rescue was Cornish. In Cornish they had found the stronger protector that Mr. Bevan suggested might be needed.

Eric followed him, and presently they were standing at the opened door of a cabin.

"There you are," said the ship's officer.

Eric saw Fernande lift her head from a bag that she was unpacking, and saw Cyril, turning briskly, droop a little with a hang-dog air.

Cyril came out of the cabin; and Cornish going into it, Eric saw him bow to Fernande and then shake hands with her. She too came out of the cabin and they returned to the deck, where she strolled up and down with Cornish, threading her way gracefully through the living obstructions that Cornish merely elbowed or pushed. Eric watched her—her black dress, her white face, her long thin nose, the tallness of her, the slightness of her,—and heard without troubling to answer the things that Cyril said while he watched.

"Yes," mumbled Cyril, "old Cornish is putting me on my legs. Well, I suppose he owed me something after the

way he treated me about *The Gazette*. What! Anyhow, he has done the handsome for once. . . . Many thanks to you, old chap, all the same. You stood by me grandly. . . . Eric, we aren't likely to meet again, I should think. Say you don't blame me—about *her*. Recollect, I didn't blame *you* when you went off with her. I knew it was she who had been the active partner. Well, I give you my word it's the same now. I didn't influence her. She settled everything herself . . . Ah!"

Cornish called to him, and he hurried meekly to the potentate's call.

Fernande had come to Eric, and they stood by the rail, close to one of the stanchions that supported the deck above them, looking at each other, but not speaking. She pulled off her glove and took his hand before she spoke.

"Good-bye, dear."

"Fernande."

"You got my letter?"

"Yes. Oh, why have you done it?"

"You know, dear. I told you." Her voice failed a little, and she spoke jerkily. "You'll thank me soon. You'll thank me till the end of your days. Good-bye, darling. You're the best—you're the best—" and she began to cry. "There. Go now. Go straight to London and be happy."

She had taken his hand in both her hands, and she held it to her lips, kissing the knuckles, wetting them with tears. Then she stood with her back turned, and never looked round.

A compartment in the train was reserved for Mr. Cornish, and he invited Eric to travel with him. He talked

while establishing himself in the corner he had chosen. He had a large supply of books and magazines, most of which he pitched upon the seat next to Eric's corner, as if offering their use.

"There's an article on Shakespeare's sonnets in this one," he said, adjusting his spectacles. "No doubt it's worth reading. But I class the sonnets as the only rubbishy thing Shakespeare ever did. Give me the plays all the time." And after that he did not say another word until the end of the journey.

Eric could not read. He watched the hurrying fields, the chalky slopes that seemed to rise and fall, the edges and banks of the railway all bright and glittering; and each telegraph pole as it flitted past the window seemed to give him a little blow on the heart to make it ache a little more. He felt like a man going back to life after standing in the presence of death—like a man who returns from a funeral and, rushing onward to noise, confusion, forgetfulness, still grieves and mourns.

He thought of Fernande, and of the word that in his mind he had made her symbol; fancying, as he did, that all people have a word, or can be given one, which summarises their best qualities and is sufficient in itself to sound the key-note of their character, their most unchanging attribute, the essence of their spiritual self. Her word was "fine." Fineness was what made her beautiful; her sense of humour, her impulses, her scorn, were all in their nature fine; her very soul was fine. Test her, put her on trial, and always then she did something fine. As now.

She was fine—tempered with fire. He thought of her

amazing power of stimulation; of how she could drag the latent force out of people, stirring them to effort, stinging them to ambitious hope, compelling them to *try*, as she always called it—even such a dull weak creature as himself,—even Cyril. In a higher and far different sense than that in which Cyril had used the phrases, she put one on a pedestal and took possession of one. She made one's spirit her own. The deepest recesses of his mind held vivid memories of her—of gestures, glances, words, of her laughter and tears.

Fate had been cruel. She was born to be the helpmate of some great and noble man, and it seemed to him now that there was no man so big that she would not have helped him. She was a woman who had been wasted—who had been utterly thrown away.

Then some thoughts of self mingled with the other thoughts. He had lost her, or she had withdrawn herself, and had told him to be happy; but he could never really be happy again. He felt tired, old, worn out. Yet, so strange is the human heart that, even in the moment of thinking this, it was as if his whole organisation rebelled and denied. He was still young, strong. All his life up to now had been merely a prelude—a long adolescence—in which he was learning very slowly and maturing very late. He must take a man's part in the world. He must work. Work was the only thing left to him. He thought of his schemes, and his dream of solid success. He could have it now if he wanted it—now that he stood alone. Then again, quite suddenly, he felt dulness, blankness. Life without some sort of love in it is nothing, and it is no good waiting until you are rich, and then taking a wife.

It is over then. The best is gone. A man wants a woman at his side all the way. And for a few moments, before he could drive away the memory, he was thinking of Ruth. What was it Fernande had said about destiny mocking one, and its cruelty in making things come just too late? This, his freedom, was too late.

Cornish was watching him, noticing the lines on his face and its sad expression. But Eric remained quite unaware of the fact. He was not conscious even of Cornish's presence in the carriage.

The train ran slowly. The train was stopping. They had reached Waterloo.

"I say." Cornish, gathering together his books, spoke again, and this time very kindly. "Don't you worry about those people. They'll be all right. I'll look after them. I have told her so."

On the platform Cornish shook hands with him, almost in the old cordial way, and said, "You can come and see me some morning. Yes, I would like to have a talk with you as soon as possible. Come to-morrow."

Eric said to himself, "He intends to make it up,—to let me work for him again—because nothing matters now."

He stood next day in the library at Carlton House Terrace, and again could see that view of the park, the buildings, the distant towers. The room itself, with its carved oak, its warm colours and its comfort and beauty, was so intensely familiar even in the smallest details that it seemed as if he had left it only an hour ago, and had now been summoned to resume a conversation that something had accidentally interrupted.

He had felt the atmosphere of the house as he crossed its threshold, a kindness and solidity, a quiet unceasing purpose that he had known nowhere else, calmness and dignity of the mind given to one by the aspect of the surroundings amidst which one dwelt. It was the same, but not the same. It might soothe and appease, but it could not charm. The true life of it was there no longer. The presiding spirit had gone, taking with her all brightness and colour, leaving even this bright sunshine cold and without cheering power.

Cornish had left his desk to walk about, and then had stationed himself on the hearth-rug with his back to the marble chimney-piece exactly as he used to do. Now he was looking hard at Eric and frowning, but speaking very gently.

"You have let yourself get much too thin, you know. I'm not a doctor, but I should say you have neglected yourself badly—not eating properly, not getting enough rest."

"Oh, I eat enough, but I haven't slept well of late."

"Doing too much. Just so. You know, I consider that technical rag—what's its name?—*Metal Working*,—I consider that a sound proposition. It'll amuse you. You must go on with it."

"Yes, I mean to."

"But of course that's only child's play. With your experience you could do it on your head—in leisure moments. Eh? . . . Now there's no reason that I can see why you shouldn't come back here and take up everything where you dropped it. How does that strike you?"

"You are very good," said Eric.

He felt gratitude, calm pleasure, but no joy. He thought, "I am as fond of him as ever. I will serve him faithfully. But the work will be as empty as this house. It is too late to patch up the rents in my life. The chance he is going to give me is no chance really."

"Good, am I?" said Cornish, staring at him. "The point is, are you pleased?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't you say so?" And Cornish went on jovially. "What's the objection? You have come to the end of your entanglements? You haven't got anything else up your sleeve, have you?"

"Oh, no."

"Well, then, everything's washed out," said Cornish. "Do you get my meaning? It's a clean slate. No, it's better than that. All can be as if the slate was never dirty." Then, with a change of manner, he spoke curtly. "You haven't asked for any news of Ruth."

"No," said Eric, shaken by the abruptness of this transition, and quite unprepared for the sharp pain that was caused merely by the sound of her name; "but I should like to have news. I hope that she is very well."

"She was, last time I saw her," and Cornish smiled. "That was at breakfast this morning."

"Oh, I didn't know that she was staying here."

"Of course she's staying here. She has never left here."

"Oh, I'm glad."

"Why are you glad?"

"Because I knew you would like such an arrangement —your daughter and your son-in-law living here."

"My son-in-law! I haven't got a son-in-law. That is,

I have two sons-in-law, but not three. I say, what are you getting at, Eric? D'you mean to say you don't know that the marriage was broken off?"

Eric had a feeling of some physical accident inside him, the pulsation of his heart gone wrong, a blood vessel broken, or an artery blocked.

"Then Ruth isn't married?" he said, in a low voice.

"Of course she isn't." And Cornish told him that she had never really cared for the young man, but had "been jumped into it" by Lady Emily and her sisters. "Yes. Well, for one reason and another. But she saw her mistake and had the courage to say so in time. Mind you, he was a good fellow. He behaved very well. His behaviour made it very difficult for her. But Ruth is full of courage. . . . So now you know. Any other questions to ask?"

Eric had none that he dared ask. Cornish stood staring at him, and then began to rub his chin. Eric watched him and he seemed to be lost in thought. He went on rubbing his chin. Then suddenly he moved to his desk, sat down at it, and picked up a pen.

"I told her I hoped to get you back. You might say good-morning to her." He began to write, and writing spoke slowly. "She—said—she—was—glad—you were returning to us."

A servant told Eric that she was in the music-room, but he heard no sound of the violin and found the big room empty.

"Then I expect she is in the morning-room," said the servant.

"All right. You needn't trouble"; and Eric went to the morning-room by himself.

She was there, alone in the room, and her first words were a repetition of her father's.

"I am glad you are coming back to us."

"I am very glad to come."

The great house was again full of life; this room was blazing with bright colour; the sunlight flowed through it like a stream of happiness. It flooded her pretty hair, her whole head. The kind face with its natural crown, the calm brows that had never worn a wedding wreath, were all shining. Her eyes were kind, as they used to be.

"Yes," he said echoing himself, "so very glad."

He wanted to take her in his arms, and she seemed with her steady unflinching eyes to be telling him to do it, but he did not dare. Not now. But one day— That would be the hope of his new life, to make her forget the past, to draw nearer, nearer to her, until he could tell her that he loved her. He did love her. It seemed to him that except in troubled dreams he had never been in love with anybody but her, that he had never profoundly admired anybody else, certainly never altogether respected anybody else. He had felt fantastic longings, deep passionate joys that gave pain and fatigue and disillusionment, but never this normal ache of the heart and desire of the mind, this plain clean sweet wish for lifelong union, this old-fashioned straightforward simple love. One day he would say it to her, all that he was feeling; he would tell her in the most eloquent language that he could call to his aid. And again he had a conviction that she knew what he wanted to say, that he need not wait, and that, if

he only dared, he could tell her without any words at all. Nevertheless he hesitated, he waited.

But Ruth was courageous, she had courage enough for both of them.

"Eric," she said, after they had talked for a little, "you told father a year ago that you liked me. Was that true, or did you just say it because he had given away my secret?"

"I said it because it was true."

"Then I don't mind anything else—I mean all that has happened since."

"Ruth!"

"Not if you still like me. And I believe you do. She said so herself. You know, she told me everything."

"Ruth, who do you mean? Fernande?"

"I mean Mrs. Faulkner," said Ruth gravely.

"When did you see her?"

"When she came here and asked me to get father to help. She made me understand. I never should have understood, otherwise . . . Eric?"

He did not speak. He looked over her head, through the walls of the room, through this solid world of realities, and saw vaguely at a great distance a phantom ship, a phantom figure—Fernande. He could not speak; for a moment or two he could not stir.

Fernande. Fernande had taken her from him; it was Fernande who gave her to him again. He thought of Fernande's last words before she kissed his hand and turned away. "You'll thank me soon. Go straight to London and be happy." Even then he did not know all that she had done for him.

"Ruth," he murmured, "how fine of her. Oh, how fine she is."

"Yes, I think she is," Ruth said very gravely. "It's an odd thing to say, but I think she is a good woman—according to her lights. . . . But now attend to me, please," and she smiled. "I am waiting for your answer. How many times do you expect father and me to go on proposing to you? Is it yes or no?"


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